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H A G A R.

VOL. II.



E. L. Stephenson

H A G A R.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“ST. OLAVE’S,” “JANITA’S CROSS,”

“META’S FAITH,”

&c. &c.

“She departed, and wandered in the wilderness.”

“All journeys end in welcomes to the weary—
And heaven, the heart’s true home, is won at last.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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H A G A R.

CHAPTER I.

JOE BLETCHLEY was quite right. That *was* just how things were going to be. But Squire Lester's foreman was a sensible old fellow. He was faithful to his own interests; but he was also faithful to those of his master; and if he could see as far through a stone wall as most people, he could also, if there was sufficient need for so doing, preserve a judicious silence as to what lay on the other side of it. Besides, Gilbert's bright keen glance of rebuke had warned him that it would be dangerous to venture too far in a certain track, and Joe did not want twice

telling to avoid anything which might disturb the friendly relations between himself and his young master.

Accordingly, when he reached home, where the old woman was, as he expected, sitting and worreting, he only told her that the Squire's son had come home from foreign parts, that he had actually lighted down out of his trap and walked side by side with him, Joe Bletchley, all the way from the turnpike gate to Mr. Guildenstern's, and had only parted company with him there because he wanted to go in and have a chat with some of the doctor's people, the Squire and Mrs. Lester being away at Cardington.

“ And talked to me as free and easy, Betsey, as if I'd been one o' the quality, and wanted me to sit with him in the dog-cart, as I dare say if he'd axed a many they would ha' done it, just to be able to talk about it at the public, as I might ha' done myself a bit

back, when I was better friends with the drink than what I am at the present. But I telled him I knew better what was owing them as owned the land than to get up alongside of them so as all the parish might see us together. So with that down he nips, and 'Joe,' says he, 'if you don't ride with me, I walk with you;' and that's how we come, him and me, right away up past all the grand houses to Morristhorpe village green. Ay, and talked to me that friendly, and telled me all about how he'd been going on out there, as you might ha' thought I were as good as hisself, which maybe I might be, if it wasn't for the bit o' money. So there'll be a change now, I reckon, afore long."

And then Joe, thinking that he had said enough, and had better not expatiate further on the nature of the change, sat down to his half-cold broth without more ado.

Old Mrs. Bletchley looked at him with

wifely reverence. Next to the distinction of walking down the village side by side with the Squire's son, was the distinction of belonging to the man upon whom such honour had been put. She took quite as much pride as her husband did in what they were both pleased to consider the respect paid to him by the owner of the Mere farm. It gave them a position entirely above that of the ordinary labourers; in virtue of which Joe Bletchley and his wife used always to sit at the top end of the row of free seats in Morristhorpe church, and go out by the same door as the Squire and his house-servants, instead of disappearing with the undistinguished herd of smocks and black bonnets through a narrow side entry which led to the vulgar side of the village.

"Ay," said the old woman, "they'd be fine and jealous would a many as seed the Squire's son picking you out that way. I'd ha' liked

fine to ha' seed you with my own eyes alongside of the young gentleman, particler if ould Mrs. Dobbinson or any of them sort happened to be about. I allers telled Mrs. Dobbinson you was a deal set store of by the Squire, when she kind o' tossed up because our Ben was keeping company with their Bessy. She'd laid the gall out, you see, for summut a bit grander ; thowt maybe she'd get her wed to one of the shopkeepers down the village, where she'd have a back room and keep a lass to do the rough work. As if any of 'em would have looked her way, and her addling no more than what she did, and putting it all on her back too with fine clothes, as I said to our Ben he wasn't doing no great things for hissself when he took up with her.

"Eh! but it's fine talking," she continued. "I lay, when she seed you agoing down Morris-thorpe village with the young Squire, and him talking that friendly to you, as you say, she'd

think the wench hadn't done so badly after all. Did you look to see if she was anywheres about? If it wasn't for them taters for the pigs as I'm boiling in the back-yard, and always keeps me going to give 'em fresh water, I'd step down the village this minute and tell her all about it. It'll be summut though to even her down with next time she sets on about Bessy having riz our Ben with marrying of him."

Joe Bletchley affected entire superiority to such considerations. He liked to be thought well of by the quality himself; but he had a notion that this liking, if suspected by the generality of the village people, would lessen him in their consideration; and Joe was a man who always walked on both sides of the bridge, when it could be done.

"Hold your tongue, can't you?" he said, with a tone of manly indifference, "or else talk a bit of sense. Do you think I never stepped alongside of a gentleman afore, and me work-

ing for the Squire this fifty year'n more, man and boy. But the women's allers so foolish, that's just what the women is, and never knows when to give over, once they get set on. I never seed a woman yet had sense enough to sit still and let her husband have his say. They're allers at it, whether you're coming in or whether you're going out. I oft think I shouldn't say so much myself if it wasn't you as set me agate."

"Shouldn't you?" said Mrs. Bletchley, a little irritated, as most women would be, by her good man's unsympathizing mood. "My mother used to tell me when I were a gall, that if ever one fool said snip, there was always another to say snap; and maybe that's the way you've learned to talk."

And with that Mrs. Bletchley went to look after the potatoes, leaving her good man to apply her remark at his leisure.

Meanwhile, Gilbert Lester was still loitering

in the neighbourhood of the old house among the chestnut trees, for quite other purpose than the lighting of his cigar, or the securing of a more convenient survey of the surrounding scenery.

When Joe Bletchley left him, he took his way down the narrow grassy path leading past the garden to the orchard, and thence to Mr. Guildenstern's field, from which there was a short cut across the fields to Cardington. He knew the orchard well enough, and the road to it also, for he had had many a romp there with Lancelot and Eulie and Opal when they were all children together. Under one of the apple trees, a splendid lemon pippin, the biggest and fruitfullest in Morristhorpe parish, there was a swing, in which he often used to lift Eulie, who was always a timid, easily frightened little creature, and hold her on his knee whilst Lancelot or the man swung them so high that she could almost reach the apple blossoms in

the branches overhead. Eulie did not care how high she swung if only Gilbert had fast hold of her ; but she would never trust herself with either Lancelot or the man ; for Lancelot, with a boy's love of mischief, would send her ever so high just for the sake of seeing how frightened she looked ; and he once played her a prank which she never forgot. He put her safely into her seat, and hoisted the swing so high that she could not jump down again ; and then after setting her going, left her there, whilst he went off with some of his companions birds-nesting in the meadows beyond. She was so helpless, the boys said, and wanted so much lifting about if they let her go with them. Lancelot was a bit of an autocrat in his way, even in those young days, and loved to play with his mastership, though he did not exert it painfully upon Eulie. But Gilbert had never served her so ; she knew she could always trust him to be good to her.

Perhaps he was thinking of those old times as he went slowly, thoughtfully, not with head erect and brave laughing face any more, down the grassy road on that bright eleventh of May. Eulie would be nearly eighteen now, quite too old for swinging or romping or anything of that sort; perhaps also, too old to like to be taken care of by him, as he used to take care of her so long ago when they went into the woods on nutting and brambling expeditions, Lancelot and Opal always going off hand in hand first, and leaving them behind; for Eulie could not get over the ground so quickly as her daring, sure-footed brother; and as for Opal, she was more like a squirrel than anything else for leaping and darting and climbing about amongst the hazel bushes. But if Eulie was only half as bonnie and loving and trustful as she was then, Gilbert knew well how things would end. He felt it already in the strange, unaccustomed shy-

ness which had come over him as soon as ever he got into that grassy road, and saw the well-remembered lilac bushes blossoming over the garden hedge, and the laburnums hanging their golden tresses side by side with the hawthorn's delicate sprays; and past them all the little white gate leading to the orchard, the orchard where he used to scramble about, with little Eulie holding his hand, to look for the great, round full-ripe lemon pippins which had rolled down into the deep grip by the hedge side.

He was making his way to that gate again. He dare not go up to the house just now, and knock at the door, and ask to see any of them. He felt his heart come up into his throat almost at the very thought of doing such a thing. He was quite sure he could not go in like a regular visitor, and talk to Miss Armitage or Mr. Guildenstern, and tell them all about his travels—what he had heard and seen and learned out in those Canadian backwoods, whilst

little Eulie was sitting by, looking at him with her shy, bright eyes; or perhaps trying to behave stiffly and properly, as a grown-up young lady of eighteen ought to behave to a young gentleman. He knew he should either go right up to her in just the old way, which perhaps she would not like now; or else feel so awfully stiff and uncomfortable, not daring to look at her, and yet all the time conscious of no other presence but hers. He wondered whether she would be glad that he had come safe home again, or whether it would not signify so very much to her now. If it did not——

And poor Gilbert leaned his arms upon the orchard gate-post, feeling ten times worse than he had ever felt in his life before.

He thought he would steal quietly into the orchard, to that low place in the hedge through which Eulie used to creep when she was a very little girl, and wanted to come to him. He should be able to see over it into the garden,

quite up to the house ; and if the French window of the drawing-room happened to be open, as it often was in summer time, Eulie might very likely be sitting on the steps outside, for that was a favourite seat of hers. And then, without being seen himself, he could watch her and find out whether she was indeed the same dear, gentle loving little creature to whom he had said good-bye so regretfully five years ago. If she was, he should just wait a minute or two, and then go straight up to her and say—

“Little Eulie, I’ve come back to you.”

The rest would follow in its own time.

CHAPTER II.

BUT Gilbert did not need to go so far as that low place in the hedge. As he leaned over the orchard gate, he saw something gleaming amongst the trees ; which something, upon closer inspection, proved to be little Miss Eulie herself, swinging under the old lemon-pippin tree, swinging higher and more fearlessly than ever she used to do when she was a little girl, and sometimes carolling to herself as merrily as any of the linnets or sparrows who peeped askance at her from the blossom-laden branches overhead.

Perhaps a pretty young girl—not one of your modern fashionable belles, all frizz and

flounce and fashion—but a real, bright, unspoiled English girl, never looks prettier than when, in a holland frock and straw hat, such as Eulie Guildenstern wore now, she is swinging herself under an apple tree in full blossom. At any rate, it would have been difficult to imagine a more bewitching picture than the doctor's daughter presented, as Gilbert watched her there, taking her pleasure in her own simple fashion under the old lemon-pippin tree in her father's orchard. All the undulating grace of her lithe figure came into play as she bent, now backward, the curly hair sweeping away from her face, catching the sunlight upon it in many a golden flicker; now forward and upward, until her rosy cheeks almost touched the scarce rosier apple-blossoms, her round white arms outstretched, her little hands grasping the rough old ropes—Gilbert thought he should not mind being turned into a rope himself,

if only those soft fingers might hold him so fast always—her tiny feet crossed so daintily, just peeping out under the holland frock, which no mass of crinoline swelled into ungainly proportions round her. And sometimes she would sit at ease, carelessly rocking to and fro, catching the apple-blossoms as they fell, tossing them and blowing them up in the air, singing to herself like a little bird for gladness and innocence of heart.

Gilbert felt as if he did not exactly know what was going to become of him. He had never been so gloriously uncomfortable in all his life before. He had loved Eulie ever since she was a little child of five years old, keeping close by him to be taken care of when they all went out together to play on half-holidays. It used to be such a pleasure to feel her little bit of a hand tucked into his great brown fist, as she trotted demurely by his side over the meadows, or was helped by him up the

moat side to that rusty old gate behind which queer, grey-eyed Opal was generally waiting. And then, when a little of that childish unconsciousness wore away, and a touch of coy girl-like reserve stole into her manner with him, it seemed even a greater pleasure than ever to do anything for her. He never felt so proud of being broad and strong and sturdy as when he was lifting Eulie over the marshes, or treading down the briers in his father's plantations, that she might pass them safely, or climbing the great ash-tree by the Mere farm gate to gather the biggest, brightest clusters of scarlet berries for her.

And when, five years ago, after saying good-bye to her so sadly, so regretfully, yet—because the tears were in her eyes as she lifted them to his—with such a new, bright thrill of happiness, he made a promise to himself that Eulie should be his wife some day, that he would spend all his life in taking

care of her and trying to make her happy. He was sure he could do it, if she would only trust him for the long years to come, as she used to trust him in their childish happy days; if she would let him help her over the rough ways of life, and smooth its briery tangles for her as he had many a time helped her over difficulties which to her then seemed scarcely less hard than these might be.

He did not think then, nor did he even think as he had driven home from Cardington, a bright, joyous, hopeful young man of three and twenty, that there would be any difficulty in making things right between them. He thought he should be able to go up to her and take hold of her hand, and draw her close to him as he used to do when they were treading through those hazel bushes in the Mere farm plantations, and say all that he had to say—say it just as easily, just as naturally, as he might have done when

they were both children, only that the story this time should be so much sweeter.

But he soon found that things were quite different. Now that he had come into the old familiar paths, and felt the old associations gathering round him, his joyous assurance had begun to waver ; and the sight of Eulie Guildenstern, a child no longer but with all a maiden's fresh unspoiled beauty, seemed quite to have taken the courage out of him. The Gilbert Lester who had hunted buffaloes over western prairies, and faced the red Indians with undaunted front, and roughed it amongst the almost unpeopled wildernesses of the Canadian backwoods, stood trembling and abashed in the presence of harmless little Eulie Guildenstern, as she sat there swinging and singing under the old lemon-pippin tree, swinging and singing like a Canadian mocking-bird, quite unconscious that her old boy-protector was so near.

He dare not go up and speak to her. He dare not so much as touch with his own the little soft hand on which her rosy cheek was resting. In her beauty and her grace she seemed so far away from him. His boyish love, cherished so purely, kept so faithfully, was passing into that reverence which the face of an innocent girl awakes in every honest man's heart. It was no such easy thing now to say all that he wanted to say—to claim that dainty little creature for his own ; to ask her to go with him, rough, rude, awkward as he seemed to himself, all through life. He felt as only a true heart can feel, how far love sets it even from the one it loves.

Poor Gilbert was turning away, looking sadder, more wistful than ever he had looked since he had said good-bye to his father and mother five years before, when Eulie jumped down from the swing and came running past the gate on her way to the house, her cheeks glow-

ing with the fresh May breeze, the apple blossoms lying like snowflakes on the curls which she kept shaking back from her bonnie girlish face.

She stopped with sudden gravity when she saw Gilbert standing at the gate. No stranger had any right to be there; for to reach the place he must have come up the private road by the garden, from which trespassers were warned by a board put up at its entrance. Supposing him to be some one come to see her papa on professional business, she said with a slight tone of rebuke in her voice—

“This is not the right way to the house. If you wanted Mr. Guildenstern, you should have gone to the front.”

That accent of rebuke, and the very, *very* little touch of dignity with which Eulie spoke, seemed to put her farther away than ever from him. As penitently as any schoolboy caught in the fruitfullest corner of some forbidden orchard

could have said it, this brown, stalwart, broad-shouldered Gilbert said,

“I—I’m sure I’m very sorry. I didn’t mean to do any thing wrong. I don’t want Mr. Guildenstern. And don’t you know me? I’m Gilbert Lester.”

“Oh! what a story you must be telling,” said Eulie, giving utterance, as she generally did, to the first thought which came into her mind.

“I’m sure I am, though. And—and I thought you would have known me too. I knew you again directly.”

“Did you?”

And then coming a little nearer to him, Eulie peered up into the face of her old friend. She must have found some trace of old times in face or voice or manner; for at last, with a smile which made Gilbert feel more than ever as if he did not know what was going to become of him, she said,

"I do believe it *is* you, after all. I'm so glad you're come back ! Let us go into the house."

And keeping fast hold of his hand, just as she used to do when she was a little child, Eulie was leading him away through the long orchard grass into the garden.

"I—think I won't go in," said Gilbert, a strange shyness coming over him as Eulie looked into his face with that bonnie girlish smile ; the smile which he had pictured to himself so often, and longed so to see again. "I don't want to go in."

Foolish Gilbert ! when it was just the very thing he did want. But his first impulse, when he felt the touch of Eulie's little hand upon his own, was to dash away anywhere out of sight ; and he was only standing there because he did not know how to get away, how to say anything which might serve as an excuse for escaping the utter bewilderment which her look and her face and her voice produced.

“Oh no, of course.” And Eulie dropped his hand. Gilbert was vexed then that he had said he did not want to go into the house, but it was no use. “Of course you don’t want to go in. There’s nobody to go and see—I forgot. Papa is out, you know he always is out in a morning; and Aunt Fanny is away; she was sent for only yesterday to Liverpool to see Aunt John who is very ill, ever so ill; and all the five little children have got no one to take care of them; and Opal has gone to the Grange to finish some sketching, and there isn’t anybody to see but just myself. I’m so sorry.”

“Oh! never mind. I don’t want to see anybody but yourself. I mean, you know,” added Gilbert, hurriedly, “I don’t care for the others; at least, of course I don’t mean that. What a simpleton I am! I don’t mean that I don’t want to see anybody; but I—I think I’d better be going.”

“Do you? Why, you’ve scarcely begun to come yet.”

“No, I haven’t,” said Gilbert, having not the slightest idea what he was saying, or how he was saying it, so completely did this unconscious little girl take all the self-possession out of him; “but you know I only came from Liverpool this morning, and I was driving down to see you—at least, I mean I was driving home, of course, when I overtook Bletchley, and he told me father and mother were out; you know, I had not sent them word I was coming, and so I thought I would come and see you; no, I don’t mean you, I thought I would come and see Mr. Guildenstern.”

Eulie began to look bewildered.

“I thought you said you didn’t want to see papa.”

“Did I? Well, I meant I didn’t want to see him half nor a quarter so much as I wanted to see—as I wanted to see—well—Miss Armitage,

and Lancelot, and all the rest of them."

"Oh! what a pity they are not at home. I am so sorry there's nobody but just me."

"I'm sure I'm not," said Gilbert, growing redder and redder every minute, through all the brown of five Canadian summers. "I'd a great deal sooner have seen you than anyone else; at least, I'd rather you'd been in than Miss Armitage; but I only came because I'd nowhere else to go to; and I think I'd better be going, so tell your father I'm very sorry he wasn't at home—at any rate, I mean to say I'm very glad there was no one but you—and say I shall come again very soon, and—good-bye."

And with that Gilbert plunged away across the flower-beds and through the gap in the orchard hedge, and into the narrow path leading to the village, leaving Eulie standing just where he had left her, looking after him in mute amazement.

He used to be such a steady, quiet fellow,

never put out of the way by anything, so different from Lancelot, who was always sharp and irritable and excitable, and scarcely knew what he was doing if anyone came upon him suddenly. Gilbert used to laugh at Lancelot for being so restless and queer sometimes, and now he was just as bad himself.

But of course, as Eulie said to herself, if he had only just come home, and if he had not seen his father and mother yet, he would feel rather restless, and want to be at home again to see if they were all well. Only he might have staid a few minutes longer, especially as there was no one at the Mere farm to receive him when he got there. He might be sure she was very glad to see him.

Just the very thing poor Gilbert was not quite sure of. Though, as soon as he was clear of the garden, he would have given almost anything to be back again. Indeed he did stay lingering about in the orchard, hop-

ing that he might see something more of Eulie, even though she did not come to speak to him any more. But she was nowhere to be seen.

If he had staid there half an hour longer, instead of striking into the Mere farm plantations and tramping up and down upon the primroses, until they were nearly all spoiled, he would have seen Eulie come tripping down the garden, fresh, bright, sweet as a little rosebud, to meet her papa, who always brought his horse up that narrow path after coming home from his rounds. And he would have heard her say, with such a ring of happiness in her voice,

“Oh! papa, what do you think? Gilbert Lester has come home again! I'm so glad!”

CHAPTER III.

THE young Squire's return produced quite a whirlpool in the usually stagnant waters of Morristhorpe society. Croquet fever set in with unprecedented activity within a fortnight after his appearance at church. Gilbert might have been at work with his mallet from morn to dewy eve if he had accepted all the invitations which were so kindly extended to him from those who considered themselves as the representatives of gentility in the place. Picnics were arranged to every available ruin, copse or bit of picturesque scenery in the neighbourhood. Rowing parties were got up. Miss Luxmore, whose uncle's garden and

grounds adjoined an arm of Morristhorpe mere, developed a sudden passion for aquatic amusements. An old boat, which, in the mistaken supposition that its days of labour were at an end, had been reposing for half a dozen years in its shed amongst a clump of willow trees, was hauled out, keeled, tarred, painted and beautified; and night after night, during the early summer months, its gaily-coloured standard might have been seen floating over a bevy of Morristhorpe belles and beaux, Gilbert Lester sometimes amongst them, who used to paddle, laughing and singing the while, over the silent waters of the mere, almost as far as that sedgy islet where, ten years ago, poor Hagar Winter had so mysteriously disappeared.

Finally, one or two young ladies, who had lately returned from school in London, and imbibed a taste for metropolitan innovations, turned their attentions to archery, and sug-

gested to their respective brothers how admirably that seven-acre field close to the Squire's garden would answer as a practising ground, if only he would be kind enough to let them have the use of it. Accordingly a deputation waited upon Gilbert, who was always ready to do a good turn for anyone. The field was promised, young Lester himself enrolled a member of the club; and twice a week, as soon as the fine weather set in, Miss Luxmore, the Misses Freestone, the solicitor's two daughters, and divers other upper-class young ladies of the place, attended by a due array of cavaliers, repaired in suitable costume to the smooth green slopes of the seven-acre field, for the purpose of practising archery and flirtation there. And though William Tell's little boy, supposing there ever was such a little boy, might, with the most perfect safety, have officiated as bull's eye, for it was never hit, still, if that target was missed

another might not be, the reaching of which was far more important.

Gilbert took it all very quietly. The thought never occurred to him when invitations for pic-nics, rowing parties, croquet gatherings and archery practising, poured in so abundantly upon him, that any other end was to be answered by them, except a little harmless amusement, or that he himself was the mark at which the fair nymphs of bow and arrow directed their aim. Simple, honest, straightforward himself, he credited everyone else, as such people generally do, with the same good qualities.

Mr. Guildenstern's daughter was never to be seen at any of these social gatherings. Perhaps it was as well for Gilbert's popularity with the rest of the young ladies that she was not, for in her presence he invariably became shy, awkward, ill at ease. Where his heart was untouched, the Squire's son and heir was the

brightest, merriest companion in the world; an adept, too, in all the pretty amusements of out-door life—the best croquet partner in Morristhorpe, the swiftest rower, the most genial guest at a pic-nic, the surest marksman that ever tried his skill in the seven-acre lot. So that, though the young ladies could not go into raptures over him on account of his exquisite polish and the aristocratic repose of his deportment, still there was sufficient attractiveness about him, independent of his solid background of wealth, to make him an object of envy in Morristhorpe society, and to cause the girl who secured him as her partner for archery or croquet, to look down with the pride of conscious complacency upon less favoured belles, even though his attentions never became so marked as to lay the foundation of any reasonable hopes respecting the future mistressship of the Mere farm residence.

But in Eulie's presence all these admirable

social qualities collapsed. He became shy, awkward, embarrassed. When he did not care for making a favourable impression, he could say no end of bright, pleasant things; when he would have given anything for ease and self-possession, his good fortune all deserted him; he could not think of anything worth saying. He felt as stupid as a schoolboy. He could not remember a single one of the pretty loving speeches which in his hours of quietness were for ever coining themselves in his thoughts for her. The humility of his simple, honest love made him seem to himself so far beneath her. He who would have done so much for her; whose whole life, since he saw her that sunny May morning with the apple blossoms falling on her golden hair, had just been one loving, tender thought of her, had no words to tell out that thought; could only brood over it, cherish it in dumb, ineffectual silence, its very earnest-

ness and reality only holding him back the more from saying it.

It was very seldom, however, that Gilbert Lester and Eulie Guildenstern met in any of those outdoor social opportunities, where the spell of shyness and awkwardness which her presence cast over him might have damaged his popularity with the rest of the Morristhorpe young ladies. The doctor's daughters—for Opal always took the name and position of his daughter now—were rarely to be seen at any of the village gaieties.

Since Mr. Guildenstern's reverses, his professional income, which was all that was left to him, had been barely sufficient to meet needful household expenses, and support Lancelot through a college training. Year after year the directors of the Penorfa mines kept raising calls upon the unfortunate shareholders; calls which Mr. Guildenstern was too proud to

meet except by honest payment. And though with every call some faint hope was held out of future success, if only the undertaking could be kept on foot a little longer, still that hope seemed no nearer its realization. Always some unforeseen accident prevented the paying of even the smallest dividend upon the money lying buried in a concern which had once promised so fairly. Just enough prospect of success remained to prevent those who had risked their all in speculation from putting an end to any further drain upon them by a deed of bankruptcy, or withdrawal to some hiding-place where they might be free from further demands.

So that there was no margin left in the doctor's income for the incidental expenses attendant upon much social intercourse. Besides, Mr. Guildenstern was a very proud man. He would not accept for his daughters any hospitality which his position restrained him from

repaying in kind. Having once stood well in Morristhorpe society, and kept almost open house to all the upper-class people of the place, it galled him now to stint his givings, and by the pitiful smallness of the present, to provoke comparison with the liberality of the past. So, rather than keep up his position meanly, he preferred not to keep it up all ; and since his losses at the commencement of his professional career, had sought his own content and taught his children to seek theirs too, in such a quiet though refined and cultured life as could be lived, apart from all social pomp and circumstance, in that unpretending, old-fashioned little house behind the chestnut trees on the village green.

Still, though Eulie was never to be seen amongst the Morristhorpe belles, who, resplendent in the most elaborate styles of promenade costume, with high-heeled boots and marvellous French skirts, and hats of all shapes and makes

and colours, used to congregate at the croquet parties, and flirt, mallet in hand, with those unappropriated members of the opposite sex whose position rendered them worthy the trouble of flirtation; and though she never, accompanied by her dark-haired, pale-faced foster-sister, sallied forth in raiment of Lincoln green to the seven acre field, and with the fascinating manner of Miss Luxmore or the Misses Freestone, commanded Mr. Lester's services, as he would so gladly have given them, for the stringing of her bow, or the holding of her arrows, or the gathering up of them when they had missed their mark, or any other of those little behests which experienced belles can lay so gracefully upon their cavaliers, still Gilbert did from time to time catch a glimpse of his little lady, and find means to show forth, though after a most awkward and unheroic fashion, some of his love for her.

For only a few days after Mrs. Bletchley's

heart had been so warmed by the condescension of the Squire's son, Lancelot Guildenstern came home, came sooner indeed than he was expected, and before Miss Armitage, shut up there with her invalid sister John in Liverpool, could devise any means for the bestowment of Opal at some convenient distance. And under pretence of having a chat with his old school-mate, Gilbert used often to stroll over to the old house behind the chestnut trees, where in long summer days Eulie was generally to be found trimming the flower-beds, whilst Opal sat in her little studio painting. And if, when, as was not unfrequently the case, Lancelot happened to have gone out with his father on professional rounds, it was not strange that instead of strolling back again to the farm, where Mr. Lester and Joe Bletchley managed matters so well between themselves, that there was no need for a third party to interfere, he found his way into the pleasant and retired garden, and loitered there, silent

for the most part, but intensely happy ; whilst Eulie, quick, bright, active as a little bird, flitted about amongst the flowers, tying up pinks, watering carnations, picking the dead leaves from her favourite roses, or weaving her pet creepers round nets of wire work ; never suspecting all the time what tendrils she was weaving round Gilbert's honest young heart, nor how gladly, if those old stories of the Metamorphoses could have come true, he, the sturdy, brown-faced yeoman would have shrunk up into the tiniest rosebush in all Mr. Guildenstern's garden, if only Eulie's hands might have tended him there, and her fingers hovered over him with such soft caressing touches as she gave to the flowers. Indeed, how could Eulie know anything about it, when poor Gilbert's feelings were so slow at manifesting themselves through any of the authorised channels of chivalrous devotion ? He could not compose sonnets to his lady-love, nor dance

attendance upon her with pretty speeches, nor kneel on one knee and press her hand to his lips after the fashion of stage courtship; nor flatter her in those honied, appropriate phrases which drop as readily from the lips of experienced cavaliers as dew-drops from the grass on a September morning. He could only stand by her, silent, awkward, ill at ease, yet somehow supremely happy—envying the very roses she plucked; thinking how lovely she was, yet how her very loveliness seemed to put her farther away from him; a whole world of affection struggling for expression within his honest heart, and not a single outlet for it, save from those clear sunny blue eyes through which, whether she knew it or not, it kept ray-
ing down so generously upon her.

And yet, though Gilbert could by no stretch of imagination be called brilliant, especially under the influence of existing circumstances, Eulie did like to have him near her. Her

heart used to beat faster when his heavy step came tramping down the gravel walk, and she had learned to listen for his voice in those mornings—he always seemed to find them out as if by instinct—when Lancelot had gone out with Mr. Guildenstern on his professional rounds, and Opal was shut up in that little painting-room of hers, busy over those pictures which, as everyone who saw them said, were so wonderful for a girl of eighteen. And it was always with a bright, happy smile, genuine outcome of a heart which had not learned to be ashamed of its own gladness, that she ran to meet Gilbert, who, shy, awkward, yet so tremblingly happy, used to take her tiny hand into his rough paw, hard with delving those Canadian clearings, or carrying rifle and pickaxe into the western forest, and say with such stumbling, hesitating embarrassment,

“Good morning, Miss Eulie, I—I—your brother Lancelot’s gone out; I think he always does go out when I come; but I don’t mind it a bit, if you’ll let me stop here a little while. Perhaps he won’t be very long.”

But Gilbert knew well enough the doctor never returned from his rounds under three hours at the very least, Morristhorpe being a large, straggling parish, and himself the only medical man in it. Though if the three hours had multiplied into thrice as many, they would have passed all too quickly, as he loitered there among the flower-beds, Eulie chattering away to him all the time, in her innocent, girlish fashion, little thinking how every word was treasured up in that rough yet kindly heart, nor how the love of her was filling all his life, and winnng from it, as sunshine from the sheltered rifts of those untrodden western forests, many a tender blossom, flowers of tenderness and chivalry more beau-

tiful from the very ruggedness of the cliffs from which they sprang.

And so the idyll of Gilbert Lester and Eulie Guildenstern, begun amongst the apple-blossoms on that bright eleventh of May, wove itself on and on, each day some pleasant rhyme added, some sweet thought spoken in look or tone or touch, rounding it towards happy completeness, until July came, and Joe Bletchley, at the head of his band of haymakers, sallied forth to that splendid bit of meadowland between Morristhorpe toll-gate and the Grange, where Squire Lester's hay harvest was always commenced, because there the sun beat down most warmly, and the brown-ripe grass waved with softest bloom; where every summer that it had been laid down for mowing, Joe had put in the first stroke, and hoisted up the last fork-load into the top heavy waggon. And where, ten years ago, this very July time, Lancelot and Gilbert had

been tumbling each other amongst the new-mown grass, and Bessy coquetting with young Ben Bletchley—both of them married now five years and more—whilst Eulie, little thinking how far over one human life the sunshine of that loving touch might reach, held up her lips to silent, sensitive, resistant Opal, and lisped,

“Me want to div oo a tiss.”

CHAPTER IV.

OF course Joe Bletchley knew just how things were likely to turn out between Mr. Guildenstern's daughter and young Master Gilbert. Take him for all in all, he was an honest, faithful old fellow, though with a little too much of what is commonly called "soft sawder" about him. He loved the Squire's son almost as if he had been his own; and having got Ben satisfactorily married—for in spite of the old woman's prejudice, Bessy Dobbinson had proved a decent thrifty housewife—he had only one desire left, namely, to see Master Gilbert settled comfortably down in the Mere farm, doing his duty to the land, as old Squire

Lester and his forefathers had done it for many a year, so that at last he might leave behind him a name as worthy and honourable as they had left.

For the Mere farm had been held by the Lesters almost as long as Morristhorpe Grange had been held by the Darques, though they had planted no evil memories there, to grow up and blacken the honest front of the old farmstead with any shadow of theirs. The Lesters, father and son, for generations past, could ride over their broad acres, and see the corn waving upon them, and the cattle feeding and the sheep browsing in the furrows, and count over the wheat stacks, each telling its own story of wealth and plenty, which clustered thickly round the ample steading, without the bitter thought that this abundance had been won through poverty of others, or that any deed for which an honest man need blush had been wrought by them to brighten their own

fireside by quenching the light in that of others. No ill wish, either of stranger or alienated friend, had ever been set upon the fertile lands of Morristhorpe mere farm.

Joe Bletchley had gone home rather thoughtfully after striking that unexpected light in the church lane on the morning of the young Squire's return home. For indeed his heart had been greatly set upon Miss Luxmore, whose ten thousand pounds, joined with the general magnificence of her personal appearance, did seem to mark her out as a most desirable partner for his master's only son. A partner, moreover, who would keep up the dignity of the place. Because, as Joe Bletchley said, having a reasonable pride in the honour of the family he had served for so many years, the mistress of the Mere farm had no need to fetch and carry for herself, and milk and churn, bake and brew, like an ordinary farmer's wife. She was a lady, who could hold up her head as high as any-

one in the parish, unless it might be the Admiral's wife; and give as grand parties as they gave, and sail about those spacious old rooms in raiment of silk and satin, and have one of the green pews at church, and ride out with the master to cover when the hounds met at Marsh hamlets; and in various other ways make an appearance in society, as the present Mrs. Lester, a quiet, meek-spirited woman, had never cared to do. If the Squire had been twenty times as rich, and counted his acres by thousands instead of by hundreds, the present Mrs. Lester would never have stepped about the village with a bit more pride or circumstance. She was a woman who could not do with that sort of thing. She would rather sit quietly by her own fireside, mending the Squire's stockings and darning that beautiful fine linen of theirs, than dress herself up and take her proper position in the place. Still that was no reason why the lady who came after should

follow in the same track. When a change was made, it might as well be to something a little more showy and improving; and Joe must say he should like the mistress of Mere farm to be a lady who could make the village people bow and scrape to her, as Mrs. Lester had never cared to have them do; but as Miss Luxmore, with her ten thousand pounds and her fine face and her grand clothes, would expect to be bowed and scraped to every day of her life.

Still, though—Joe reasoned to himself as he fetched the clean straw into the fold-yard, whilst Gilbert with his father and mother sat talking over old times on the first day of his home coming—a man sometimes did better to get a fortune *in* a wife, than a fortune *with* a wife; and if Miss Eulie did not make so much show with her flounces and her feathers as some other young ladies in the village, she had the real make of a lady

about her and no mistake; carried it as much in her sweet voice and pleasant smile and winning ways, as Miss Luxmore did in all the splendour of her gorgeous plumage. And though it would certainly be in a different fashion, she might perhaps keep up the dignity of the family as well, though that ten thousand pounds *would* have been a snug nest egg for the young master, when all was said and done.

Besides, Joe Bletchley, in spite of his lowly birth and rude speech, had a fine perception, as many village rustics have, of feminine propriety. And he inclined still more decidedly to Eulie's side of the question, when, a week or two after young Gilbert had settled at home, the seven-acre meadow was requested as an archery ground, and the ladies and gentlemen came twice a week to practise there, to the great peril of any stray ducks and geese who happened to be giving their families the benefit of parental supervision on that part of the

farm. For Miss Luxmore, who appeared to be the ruling spirit of the concern, laid herself out so very much to win the young squire's preference, and put on such supreme airs and graces, and always contrived to secure Gilbert's company home when the practising was over, and used to toss her head so scornfully if any of the other young ladies ventured to put herself between the young master's attentions and her own ten thousand pounds, that Joe began to think things were turning out better than if he had had the disposing of them according to his first intentions.

"He'll be a vast sensibler, after all," said Joe to himself, "if he takes the little one; because she don't never put herself forwards. I can't abide a girl as puts herself forwards. It ain't a woman's place to be fore hoss o' the team, and that's what the young Miss with the ten thousand pounds is aiming for, I reckon."

"So, after that, Joe had a wonderfully kind

smile for little Eulie if he met her anywhere about the village; and when Gilbert, honest, simple, guileless young Gilbert, used to say to him, after haymaking had fairly set in,

“Well, Joe, I guess you’ll manage without me at the seventeen acre to-day. You know what to set the men to better than I do myself, and keep them at it, too. And I should just like to stroll down and see how Guildenstern is getting on. You see when a fellow’s been away five years, he naturally feels as if—”

“All right, master, all right,” Joe would reply, with a smile on his wizened old face. “We’ve made shift to do without you ever sin’ I comed to this here place, and we’ve comed to nothing wonderful quick if we can’t hold things together a bit longer. Though it isn’t Mr. Lancelot as you’ll light on this morning, sir, for I seed him with mine own eyes a bit since, going down the village in the gig;

he goes out with his father most mornings, does young Mr. Lancelot now, sir."

"Never mind, Joe; he won't be long before he's back, and I won't either. Just you see that the men do their duty to the hay, and don't let them hurry it up over-quick. The farmers out yonder in Canada never let their hay be hurried up, it's such a bad thing for it. But you'll make it all right."

And with that, Gilbert's grey mare used to clear the gate at a bound, and before Joe's broad back was bent to the scythe again, Jess and her rider were half way to Morristhorpe toll-gate, within sight of the old house among the chestnut trees.

"All right; yes, I should think I shall make it all right," Joe would say to himself at such times. "It's well for them as has a good hand like myself to leave behind among the men when they go to do their courting. And he

allers starts telling of me something about Canady, last thing afore he sets off. I lay he thinks it'll keep me agate studying over it, for he knows I were allers a deal set upon knowing how them folks out there did their farming. But I know what it means, Master Gilbert—I know what it means.”

And Joe would stand straight for a minute or two to rest his old back, and then go on talking to himself.

“Why, it was nobbut day afore yesterday Squire says to me, Joe, says he, it's wonderful it is, the store them two lads sets by each other. Gilbert don't seem as if he could rest easy away from that boy of the doctor's. And I didn't let on to him but what I knowed no more nor himself how things was going, for he was allers a man, was the Squire, as thowt he knowed a vast. And folks as thinks they know a vast, nat'rally takes it amiss if other folks don't

think same. I never set eyes on a man yet who could run a good count of himself, along with a good count of any other body. That's a team don't draw well together, nohow. Folks as thinks they knows a vast, allers runs best single. But——”

And here Joe would lay down his scythe and stump towards the other end of the field to see how the mowers were getting on with their work.

“But it's all right. I'd do the hay harvest myself fifty times over—ay, and he wouldn't get it better done neither, wouldn't the Squire; for I'd like to see Joe Bletchley's ekal at mowing a bit o' meadow land and cleaning it well—to further Master Gilbert and Miss Eulie, bless her! It's a good day's work they'll both of 'em do when they get into train together. And nobbut t'other Miss has as good luck, it's little need the doctor'll have to rue, though she wouldn't ha' done for our young master, wouldn't Miss Opal,

according to my line o' thinking, and I reckon to know as much as a vast. They're sort o' different, that's what they are, them two."

CHAPTER V.

SQUIRE LESTER'S foreman might be slightly mistaken in laying the flattering unction to his own soul that he knew "as much as a vast;" but he certainly came very near the mark when he gave it as his opinion that Eulie and Opal Guildenstern were "sort o' different."

They were as different as two natures can be, one of which has been reared in the unclouded sunshine of love and tenderness, the other cast out into the cold twilight of loneliness, a twilight in which neither flower can expand nor fruit ripen; in which, nevertheless, the dew of blessing fails not, and in whose sometimes wholesome gloom the true root-life, though long held back, is still nourished and strength-

ened; so that when at last the late sunshine comes, the flower which that life had so long been silently feeding, may burst forth with a beauty all the more rare for that it comes at evening-time, when others are closing.

Hagar Winter's foster-child had lived in Mr. Guildenstern's family for more than ten years, without winning very much love from anyone but Eulie, who loved her as the gentle love the strong, as the frail and clinging love those from whose deeper current of life their own is enriched. Yet Eulie, in that very taking, gave as rich a blessing as she received. That innocent child-kiss offered years and years ago from the unerring instinct of an affectionate heart, had flung wide open Opal's life, to give what she was as blest in giving as Eulie in receiving. Her love for Eulie was the window through which sunshine poured into her life. Eulie alone, of all the people by whom she was surrounded, never misunderstood her.

No opposing currents of mental atmosphere ever seemed to pass between them. Fitful, restless, defiant, moody as Opal might appear to other people, and undoubtedly often was, for resistance and tenderness mingled strangely in her nature, there was always a safe shelter for little Eulie in that true though wayward heart; a certain steady, rock-like firmness of love, on which the child might rest and be at peace.

Not that she could not love others, but that they failed to win that love; or that she, willing to be won, lacked what only a generous early training could have given her, that free, upspringing, outspoken welcome which others, more gently nurtured, have for those who show them kindness.

Perhaps there never was a nature which so readily as Opal's responded to those subtle, invisible, almost intangible currents which are for ever crossing and recrossing each other,

in the soul's atmosphere. She was as sensitive to changes in that atmosphere as is the mercury in a barometer to the slightest variation in the pressure of the air around it. A word, a look, a tone, was enough to elevate or depress. She had not confidence enough in herself to believe that she could command favour by the simple development of her own natural unrestrained life. She had not confidence enough in others to take for granted what they did not give with full assurance of welcome. Then, still further to help on the untoward conditions of her life, she was abundantly endowed with that morbid sensitiveness, most fatal and peace-destroying gift for any woman, which ever seeks within itself for the reason of change in others; change which is often quite unintentional, or at worst temporary; change which a bright, trustful nature would take patiently, or perhaps never feel at all.

So that poor Opal Guildenstern's was not likely to be a very happy life, even had there not been the actually disturbing influence of Miss Armitage's unconcealed coldness to mar it. People who enter the world with little confidence in others and less in themselves, who have learned to doubt where they should trust, because they once trusted where it would have been better for them to have doubted, are sure, unless some exceptionally pitiful wave of fortune anchors them early and safely in the shelter of one true heart, to find that world a troublesome portion. Well for them if, beneath their shifting, uncertain faith in themselves and others, there lies, like rock under the ever changing ocean tide, a sure, settled faith in One whose love is over all, unchanging, eternal; steadfast alike in storm and calm, in sunshine or in gloom. Well for them, also, if into that world which must bring them so many crosses and disappoint-

ments, they can carry a steady, unwavering power of resistance against accident and circumstance; power, when faith in self and others and everything but God is gone, still to go resolutely on in the slow, dull tramway of duty, knowing that that road, and that only, conducts through more or less of patient endurance to sure rest at last.

When Opal was a child she had a wonderful talent for getting wrong with everybody but Eulie. She never came to an open rupture with anyone, excepting Bessy Dobbinson—towards whom she cherished a spirit of resolute rebellion, breaking out now and then into actual defiance—and Miss Armitage, between whom and herself there was ever a conscious, though respectful antagonism. But she used to misunderstand those about her, and get misunderstood by them, and then the loving, yearning, repentant little alien, too proud to explain herself or to seek explanation

from others, used to brood over her griefs in silence, whilst lookers-on, perhaps those who had given the wound, used to expatiate upon the remarkable sullenness of Mr. Guildenstern's foster-daughter, and contrast it with the loveable gentleness of little Eulie, who was never satisfied until a kiss and a kind word had wiped away the remembrance of any juvenile perversity into which she had been betrayed. And yet Eulie did not feel a whit more penitent than Opal, nor did she long more earnestly to be reinstated in the favour of those whom she had grieved. Only she was not too proud to reveal this longing, and to ask that which she and Opal alike could ill spare, the return of love and confidence from those who had withheld it for a season.

The wound which Hagar Winter's child had received from Amos Durben was not destined to be the last which she should receive in those early years when impressions are so

lasting as to cast their shadow or their sunshine over a whole long life. The second great wrong of her life grew out of her childish love for Lancelot, and was inflicted, perhaps unconsciously, by Bessy Dobbinson, who never, as she expressed it, "took" to the little motherless stranger, whose perverse ways and rebellious disposition made such an unwelcome addition to her domestic cares.

That first act of boyish chivalry by which Lancelot became Opal's champion in the affair of the cherries, had formed a silent bond between them, which was never forgotten. After that, the shy, reserved child seemed to have an instinctive sense of safety in Lancelot's presence; and he on his part had a certain boyish pride in defending her against the attacks of Bessy Dobbinson, who chafed in secret at the untractableness of her young nursling. Opal felt that Lancelot could understand her better than anyone, except Eulie. He had once been

kind to her when no one else had cared to protect her, or stand up for her rights; and though they often sparred and quarrelled after that—for they were both of them defiant and resistant enough—still they always, however far apart their childish feuds separated them for a time, trembled slowly back again; for their souls were set to each other, like the needle to the pole. And so as their little lives were lived together, there grew up in Opal's heart, silently, quietly, unconsciously, that love which is the purest, most unselfish feeling in a child's life, truest fosterer of tenderness and respect and chivalry, best teacher to her of gentleness, to him of honour. A love so infinitely rare and delicate that a word can destroy it, yet so beautiful that the hues of its early promise never quite die away from the soul, but linger on to the evening time of life, like the memory of some other,

diviner life, which has been lived and lost long ago.

Lancelot and Opal dreamed on in this sweet unselfish child-love, until Bessy Dobbinson broke its glamour. Some rude, coarse remarks made to them about "sweet-hearting" shivered in a moment what had grown up so fairly and beautifully around them. It could never be brought back again. With that fine instinct of modesty which dwells so strongly in the heart of a child, Opal shrank now from Lancelot; not because she had given over caring for him, but because he had been teased about her; and she would rather endure the pain of silence and alienation, than expose him to the taunt which, once spoken, might be spoken again if she dared to show any more interest in him. And Lancelot on his part turned away from her, because he thought she would be ashamed of being seen so much with him, and partly because he had a boy's

horror of being laughed at, which even his love for the shy, yet strong-hearted little Opal, could not conquer. He was half ashamed of himself for having loved her so much; and by an affected indifference tried to let Bessy see that she had been mistaken; forgetting that the pain he caused to Opal might be a dear price for the freedom from taunt and teasing which he won for himself.

And so the two innocent hearts, whose love had been to them for a few short weeks as the garden of Eden itself, had the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge given to them by the enemy in the shape of Bessy Dobbinson; whereupon, self-convicted, they fled, not alas! together but separately, into the wilderness outside, while their betrayer became their punisher, and stood at the gate of that paradise with the drawn sword of ridicule to bar their access any more to its childish peace and content.

Soon after that, Lancelot went away into

Germany with Gilbert Lester. Opal, who could not give over caring for him when he had seemed to give over caring for her, but only hide that care away because she had been made to suffer so bitterly for it, felt as if her very life were being torn from her; but she made no sign, and tried to appear as if nothing was the matter, lest the drawn sword in the shape of Bessy Dobbinson's ridicule should smite her for even daring to regret the paradise from which she had been driven. Only when she had said good-bye to Lancelot, and slipped into his hand a tiny book-mark, which, with infinite terror lest it should be discovered, she had worked for him herself, she ran away and stood in a corner of the orchard, from which the high road to Cardington could be traced for nearly a mile. There alone, the slow tears dropping from her eyes, her little heart throbbing with wild, unconquerable pain, she watched until the gig in which

Mr. Guildenstern was driving Lancelot to the station had become a scarce distinguishable speck in the distance.

Then she came back, still trying to look as if nothing was the matter. Truly a hard thing for a child to do, the balm of all whose little sorrows should be that they can be wept away upon some loving heart, melted in the sunshine of some kindly smile ; a balm which poor Opal seemed destined not to find for any sorrows of hers, early or late.

When Lancelot came home three years afterwards, she never saw him at all, for she had been sent to the sea-side with Mrs. John Armitage's children, for the benefit of her health. Afterwards, in his college vacations, and during the short visits which he made whilst studying in the Temple—for Lancelot disliked Morrishorpe, and did not care to spend more time there than he could help—Miss Armitage had always arranged matters

so that Opal should be away, except for a chance day or two; because, as she said, there was never any telling how things might turn out between young people who had been brought up together, when they began to be old enough to think about settling in life.

So Opal and Lancelot were strangers yet, scarcely having clasped hands since those early days when they wandered together through the paradise which their innocent love had made, and from which a single cruel word had driven them. And though the drawn sword of Bessy Dobbinson's ridicule no longer barred its entrance, yet the equally trusty weapon of Miss Armitage's prudence, as that worthy lady hoped and expected, would have the same effect.

CHAPTER VI.

PERHAPS Miss Armitage would have been wiser in her day and generation had she let these two young people take their chance together, and run the risk of "something serious" coming of it. For had she let them alone from the very beginning, allowed them to grow up in the free, fearless intercourse of brother and sister, that childish fascination might have died away, and their later intercourse, lacking that element of strangeness which often quickens interest where long familiarity deadens it, might have been such as to give her not the slightest cause for uneasiness.

At all events, since she had assumed to herself the serious responsibility of acting as Lancelot's providence in his matrimonial affairs, she ought so to have arranged matters that Sister John's affliction should have taken place at any other time rather than when the mitigating of it compelled her, Miss Armitage, to leave her favourite nephew exposed unprotected to the influence of that beauty both of person and mind, which would be so much more fatal that it was unaccustomed. Miss Armitage had never lamented over anything so much for a long time, never indeed since the death of her poor dear sister Guildenstern, as she did over that unlucky concatenation of circumstances which, whilst it brought Lancelot back to Morristhorpe a fortnight before his time, kept her in Liverpool, mothering Sister John's five children, week after week, when evils of untold magnitude might be developing themselves at home, evils which

she was at present powerless either to turn aside or remedy.

For Lancelot had all a young man's admiration of beauty, and Opal was very beautiful now. Her beauty, too, was of that rare order which, though not generally popular, touches so deeply where it touches at all. Much of her character had wrought itself into her features, giving them a mobile sensitiveness, over which a touch of defiance brooded, as though daring the stranger to conquer it, and yet fascinating him by that very daring. If Hagar Winter could have seen her foster-child now, she would have had no need to mourn for the life which could have written so lofty a story on her face. Yet the child features were there still, only transfigured into the light and beauty of maidenhood. The grey eyes flashed under their dark lashes with the same quenchless spirit, the delicate lips were bent into the same proud lines, or

softened into the wistful tremulous smile which little Eulie had been the first to win from them. And there was the same look of will and purpose folded down under such strong quietness, the resistance which, if needful, could overcome so much, the energy which, conquering shyness and overpowering sensitiveness, would break out, when circumstances called it forth, into a channel for itself, and do and dare as there was neither room nor need now to do and dare.

And in her step and bearing, and in every gesture of the tall, swaying, lissome figure, and in the quick changeful expression which came and went upon her face, the same untamed and tameless spirit showed itself, yet blended with the shy mistrust, both of self and others, sure instinct of a loving and susceptible temperament. The very maiden to charm with her mingled defiance and sweetness, her strange blending of pride and humility, a

young man like Lancelot Guildenstern, who gloried in having something to conquer; who was never so much in his element as when the intensity of his own nature met and clashed with another, like, yet different; who held all a strong man's will and energy and daring reined in under an outward aspect so calm now and self-controlled, held beneath it, too, a sensitiveness almost as easily wounded as Opal's, and a heart as loving, though as slow to be won to any outward expression of that love.

There was one trait in Lancelot's character which did not find its like in Opal's. He rejoiced in power over others. He could not rest without exercising it. To those beneath him in firmness of nature, he was a tyrant. He had no toleration for weakness, when it was the weakness of folly and culpable ignorance. Even with his equals in mental calibre, he could not rest until he had

found out some little faulty spot which he might assail and conquer, even whilst acknowledging them his compeers in everything else. His love of power ruled his benevolence, and in the pride of conscious victory he sometimes forgot the suffering of others through which that victory had been gained. Opal's strongest instinct was not that of conquest, but of sacrifice. Where she loved much she suffered much; and if the slumbering energy of her nature ever roused her to outward strife, it would be for others, not for herself.

She had not looked forward very much to this home-coming of Lancelot's. In their occasional meetings since he went away to Germany, meetings which Miss Armitage had taken care should be very occasional, there had been no re-awakening of the long-ago childish preference, no turning back again by mutual consent to the gates of that paradise

from which Bessy Dobbinson's ridicule had driven them. Not that she had forgotten him though, or that the sweet memory of that early dream had quite passed away. She remembered well enough, even now, the first time that she saw him after he came from Germany ; how her heart beat, and how she had trembled with a strange new tumult of fear and longing, when, after being properly tidied up by Bessy, she had gone into the room to shake hands with him, scarce daring to look into his face, for he had grown so tall and grand. Her love for him had always been touched with fear, but the fear almost conquered the love then. And the very intensity of her feeling choked the utterance of it, so that she could only stammer out a few awkward words ; to which Lancelot, who had lost the frankness of boyhood, and not yet won to anything like manly self-possession, replied as awkwardly, having doubtless in his

remembrance the ridicule of Bessy and the shame and humiliation which it had caused them both.

Opal thought he spoke to her in that stiff, reserved way because he wanted her to know that he had forgotten all about their early friendship; and so ever after that she had tried very hard not to think about him. Tried, poor child, but only succeeded in burying her thoughts of him out of sight, not in plucking them up and casting them forth from her heart.

However, that she had kept them out of sight was some victory gained. For there was great pride about Opal Guildenstern, even in her early childhood. Although she could never turn quite away from anyone whom she had once loved; although having given, it was not her way to take back that gift and bestow it upon someone who asked more graciously for it, still, cost what it

might, she so controlled herself as to make those about her believe that she could do this. Too sensitive to confess the wound she had received, she took change or forgetfulness in those she cared for with a negligent defiance which might easily be mistaken for indifference. No word of loving rebuke from her, not one questioning or beseeching glance, ever asked back again what had been taken from her. No one could play fast and loose with Opal without finding it a dangerous game.

Besides, when she did really long for favour, the natural humility and self-distrust of her character came forward again. What was she, that she could be loved? She was not like Eulie, fair to look upon; nor, like Eulie, had she rich gift of smiles and caresses for those who might have loved her. She could only be silently faithful to them; and people did not care for silence, they wanted words.

So, as the years led her on from childhood into maidenhood, giving her, though unacknowledged by herself, grace of form and beauty of feature, those years, as they came and went, only deepened in her a feeling of shyness and strangeness to all but Eulie. And at an age when most girls are bent upon display and conquest, she had learned to think of herself as one who could neither give pleasure nor excite even passing interest. In society she was only conscious of a yearning desire to please, followed always by the miserable humiliation of failure. She would so gladly have been kind and pleasant; but the people with whom she associated in Morrithorpe seemed to take it for granted that she could be neither.

Perhaps they were right. It would be better to live alone, to keep quite out of the way of those who only misunderstood and fretted her. Enough if Eulie had faith in her. Eulie

who never railed upon her for her dulness, never upbraided her with coldness or silence or reserve, never lectured her, as Miss Armitage used to do, upon the folly of shutting herself out from companionship, and cultivating that selfish exclusiveness, which by-and-by would gain such a hold upon her that she would never be able to shake it off.

Selfish exclusiveness, when all the time she was longing so for some one to whom she could be good and kind ; when it was in her heart to give as richly as Eulie gave, only that something seemed for ever to hold her back from the giving ! Doubtless when Lancelot came home, he would think the same of her—say that she was reserved, mistrustful, forgetful ; she whose very dearest memories were those which he had given her so long ago. Well, let it be so. She could not help it. It was not in her, as it appeared to be in some people, to show herself off to advantage, and let others know all that she

could feel for them ; and how, instead of being cold and proud and sullen, she did really want them to care for her as much as she could have cared for them.

Lancelot might do as he liked, and think as he liked ; she would not trouble him. After all, it would only be for a little while, not more than two months ; and there were plenty of young ladies in the village who would help to make the time pass pleasantly enough for him, if he did not care to spend it all at home. There were the Miss Freestones, and the solicitor's daughters, fine, showy, accomplished girls, not at all shy like herself, or backward in making the best of their opportunities. And there was Miss Luxmore, with her ten thousand pounds, and splendid figure, and general air of style. Miss Armitage had said more than once in Opal's hearing, what a very suitable wife Miss Luxmore would make for Lancelot ; so

well calculated to keep up his position, and increase it by her worldly advantages. There was nothing, Miss Armitage said, would give her more pleasure than for her nephew to turn his attentions towards Miss Luxmore. So that Lancelot would not greatly need companionship if his sullen, reserved foster-sister did not succeed in making herself very agreeable to him.

Such thoughts as these passed through Opal's mind as she stood before her easel in the little painting room which Mr. Guildenstern had set apart for her sole use. Opal had a great talent for drawing and designing. When she was quite a little child, living with Hagar Winter at Morrishorpe Grange, it used to be her greatest treat to get hold of a slate and pencil and amuse herself through the long gloomy evenings by copying the patterns which Hagar bought for her Honiton lace work. And she used to aston-

ish her foster-mother sometimes by the skill and accuracy with which, a year or two later, she could copy the outlines of leaves and flowers in the old garden. Hagar Winter had looked forward to this talent as a possible means of livelihood for Opal in years to come, but all that had been taken out of her hands. However, Mr. Guildenstern, who was himself no mean artist, though of late he had not been able to devote much time to the use of his brush, soon discovered the child's tastes, and had taken pains to have them cultivated. When she had advanced as far as he could take her, he procured other teaching for her. She was now taking lessons from an artist at Cardington, who told her that she only needed time and patience to rank with some of the best female painters of the day ; and that if she could study for a few years in London or on the Continent, she might soon turn what

was now a mere amusement into a lucrative profession.

After that encouragement, Opal worked on with redoubled industry. She dearly longed for some means of earning her own livelihood; not that she might be independent of Mr. Guildenstern, who had given her a home for so many years, but that, whilst still being indebted to him for such kindness, she need not take with it that which she knew was sometimes difficult for him to give—the means of keeping her in equal ease and comfort with her foster-sister Eulie.

For Miss Armitage had once or twice gently hinted that Opal ought to be doing something for her own living; and only the year before, on her return from a visit to Liverpool, just after Opal's education was completed, she had said something about Sister John wishing to meet with a young

lady to assist her in the management of her children. But Mr. Guildenstern, for whose benefit the hint was dropped, very soon took it up, though not in the way Miss Armitage had expected. Opal and Eulie should never be separated, he said, unless to settle in homes of their own. Opal's coming had been like a new life to Eulie when the child seemed slowly pining away; and though she did not need so greatly now what Opal gave her then, still there was to be no change in the old arrangement. The sisters were to be sisters still, so long as he was able to keep the home together for them; and when the time came that he could no longer do that, then, but not until then, Opal might think about turning her talents to profit.

This was not said by Mr. Guildenstern, though the hint which led to it had been given, in Opal's presence. But the very

next morning Miss Armitage took the opportunity of repeating it to her, and commenting upon Mr. Guildenstern's generosity, in a manner which convinced the sensitive girl that her aunt had no respect for dependence in a woman; and that if she could have her own way there would soon be a change in the arrangement of matters at the doctor's house. And ever since that time the subject had kept cropping up when a convenient opportunity occurred; for when once Miss Armitage set her mind upon any thing, she was not the woman to let it slip; and she had set her mind upon some arrangement which, by removing Opal safely to a distance from Morristhorpe, would prevent her from exerting any untoward influence over Lancelot, or winning such a measure of interest, not to say affection, from him, as would disincline him to the securing of Miss Luxmore's favour.

The last time poor Opal had been subjected to a dissertation of this sort was only a week or two before the unexpected return of Lancelot from London. Miss Armitage commenced operations by a few chance remarks on the additional expenses which would be involved in his residence with them for some considerable length of time, and the inconvenience, under present circumstances, of the very small house which Mr. Guildenstern occupied. Of course, she said, it did very well for them whilst the children were young; and might have been made to answer their purpose even longer than that, if her brother-in-law had not thought fit to make an addition to his family. If there was one thing in Mr. Guildenstern's character which did sometimes lead him astray, it was his benevolence. He never thought either of himself or his family when a kindness was to be done to anyone who needed it. And the claims of

his children were very urgent now. Some provision really ought to be made for poor dear Eulie ; girls settled so much more advantageously when it was understood that a little fortune might be expected with them—such a fortune, slender of course, but still very useful, as her brother might have laid aside for his daughter if——

And there Miss Armitage stopped. But Opal knew well enough whither that “if” tended ; and she knew, too, that Miss Armitage intended she should know.

Then poor Lancelot. It really was such a sad thing about poor Lancelot. So straitened as he would be in the first years of his professional life. It was a thousand pities he could not bring his mind to follow in his father’s footsteps, and take the practice at Morris-thorpe, if only to keep it in the family, as it had been for more than a hundred years. But she could excuse him. A young man naturally

shrunk from occupying an altered position in the place where his father had once been so much looked up to. And if he could manage to keep on his feet for a few years until his name was known, and briefs began to come in, there was no fear of his making his way eventually. Only the waiting would be so tedious. And the poor young man might wish to settle in life. Indeed that was the most natural thing for a young man to look forward to.

And here Miss Armitage had glanced keenly at Opal, who, knowing that she was suspected, felt the proud blood begin to tingle through her colourless cheeks.

Every young man, Miss Armitage continued, looked forward to that; but it would be quite useless for poor Lancelot to do anything of the sort, unless he could meet with both wealth and position in the lady of his choice. She did hope, whatever else he did, the poor dear fellow would not go and burden himself with a wife

who could not help him to settle. In that case there could be nothing for him but a long, hopeless struggle with circumstances. For the villany of that wolf in sheep's clothing, Captain Darque, had quite put it out of Mr. Guildenstern's power, after giving his son a college education, to do anything more for him. Those wretched mines swamped everything. Even if her poor brother could lay aside a little from his professional income, a call was sure to be raised, and away it all went. So that Lancelot would have to depend entirely upon himself, and therefore she did hope and trust he would not make a foolish match, now that the world lay before him; but look out for some one who would help him to retrieve the position his father had lost, and enable him to establish himself at once, instead of toiling until the best part of his life was spent before he could settle down to a home and fireside of his own.

After that long tirade Miss Armitage was silent for a little while, and then said,

“I should exceedingly like Miss Luxmore to join you and Eulie with your singing. She was saying only the other day how much she should enjoy having some one to practise with. Eulie and I will go and speak to her about it to-morrow.”

CHAPTER VII.

BUT on the morrow Miss Armitage had been summoned to Liverpool, to that diet of nursing and judicious management which was destined to keep her an unwilling prisoner at Sister John's for so many weeks ; weeks in which her presence was more than ever needed at home, to put things into a satisfactory track for Lancelot's future well-being.

After that conversation, or, to call it more properly—for Opal had very little to do with it, save listening—that monologue in the Chesnut cottage drawing-room, the poor girl worked on more diligently than ever with her painting, in the hope that some day she might be able to

dispose of her productions and do something, if at first only very little, towards her own maintenance. Her master had told her that she only needed industry and a few years of study in London or abroad, to do well. And how hardly she worked, and how eagerly she coveted those few years of study, only those can know who, proud like her, and like her full of sensitiveness and mistrust, are still compelled to eat the bread of dependence.

She had now an additional reason for wishing to gain her own livelihood. For nearly a month Gilbert Lester, rough, simple, yet kindly-hearted Gilbert Lester, had been found loitering, whenever he had a convenient opportunity for so loitering, in the garden of the old house behind the chestnut trees; or looking in, evening after evening, to inquire, as he said, when Lancelot was expected home. And during the last fortnight a very slight illness of his mother's had given him an ex-

cuse for coming every day, and sometimes twice a day, to fetch medicines for her, or to bring some trifling message about her state of health. Though why one or another of the dozen men and boys who were always at work in the immediate neighbourhood of the Mere farm house, could not have ridden over to bring the messages and take back the medicines, was more than Mr. Guildenstern, being a man of slow perceptions, had ever found out.

Opal guessed the reason, though. Joe Bletchley was not the only one in Morris-thorpe who knew why Gilbert Lester's foot-prints were so often left on the mossy path which led to the orchard gate, close by the old lemon-pippin tree, where Mr. Guildenstern's children used to swing when they were little ones, and where of late Miss Eulie had taken a wonderful fancy to amuse herself when she was not busy amongst the flower-beds. Opal

had noticed how Gilbert Lester's great brown hand would tremble if but Eulie's little soft fingers chanced to touch it; how his voice, somewhat too loud and strong, the Morris-thorpe young ladies said, for drawing-room purposes, took such a low, tender tone when he spoke to her; how, when she was trimming the flowers in her own little special plot of ground down by the orchard hedge, he would stand watching her by the hour together, leaning idly against one of the old chestnut trees, never seeming to feel the time long—he, Gilbert Lester, strong, active, restless Gilbert Lester, who at the farm was never content unless he could be doing something, tossing hay in the fields, or helping the labourers to stack it up; or tramping off with rifle and bag and flask through the plantations in search of game, anything and everything, his father said, except being still for Gilbert. And yet that being still was

the very thing for which he appeared to have such a vocation whenever he came to the old house amongst the chestnut trees.

Opal saw it all. And she noticed, too, how Eulie's ways took such a pretty touch of shyness when he was by to watch them; and how her once innocent, girl-like frankness of voice and look had changed since he came, gathered over them a veil of maiden reserve, which made her seem sweeter, more lovable than ever. But with a fine womanly instinct of silence, which is not always given with the other instinct of perception, Opal spoke no word of all this. She never raised a blush on Eulie's cheek by shy hint or inuendo, never tried to drive the guileless little heart out of its new-found paradise by thrusting upon it that fruit of the Tree of Knowledge which, tasted before its time, is so bitter often and so fatal. All that she knew was only told in a more loving smile for Eulie, a closer

clasp of her hand sometimes, a more lingering kiss when at night they bade each other farewell. And if there came over her sometimes the sad thought that Eulie would need love of hers no longer now, that the only one whose life she could enrich and sweeten had passed beyond her reach through that gate Beautiful where no poor shining of hers could give it brightness any more, she kept that sadness to herself alone.

Still Opal knew that whenever Eulie left that old house on the village green—as leave it she would before long—it could be home for herself no more.

“My dear, stay where you are. What would Eulie do without you?”

That had always been Mr. Guildenstern’s reply when several times lately his foster-daughter, stung by some remark from Miss Armitage, had proposed to go away and do something for herself. Now that reply could

not be given very much longer. If none but Eulie needed her, it was time she began to think of another home.

But where? That was the question. Opal never feared being able some day to earn her own living by painting; and until that day, by some other way which should still leave her leisure to work at the art whose love was almost a passion to her—the art which, when Eulie was away, would be the sole aim and sweetness of her life, its one interest and occupation. But she dreaded, with a dread which only tender hearts can feel, the loneliness of a home where no companion voice should ever speak a kind word to her; when, turning away from her work—and she knew it would weary her sometimes, as work done for daily bread and not for daily comfort must often weary—there should be no face of friend, sister or mother, to make sunshine for her in her solitary chamber, or to give back smile for smile when

the work was done, or cheer her with some brave bright look, or speak a word of hope for a future which must needs be one of hard toil, even though it brought success and fame.

Then she would think of Hagar Winter, the sad, grave, stern, yet faithful woman, who in the hour of trial would never have forsaken her ; who would have given her, if not words of love, or much outward show, the steadfastness of a devotion in which, at least, she might have found a shelter from danger, and trusty though silent protection, when that danger must needs be faced.

“Oh ! Mother Hagar, if you had not died,” said Opal to herself, when Eulie’s new love had taken away her sole claim on Mr. Guildenstern’s kindness, and Miss Armitage’s sharp, disdainful words had robbed her home of any more comfort or peace. “Oh ! Mother Hagar, if you had not died !”

And then, as those whose sunlight is slowly

fading away, look out for the faintest streak of promise in the eastern sky, she would try to cheer herself with the thought that perhaps after all Hagar Winter had not died. She had often listened to the story of her strange mysterious disappearance, as told by the village people, who always seemed to look upon it as a matter of vague uncertainty. She might, they said, have been saved. She might have been carried away by the tide into open water, and there picked up by some passing boat and put on shore, where some kind souls would do their best to warm her into life again. Or she might have drifted upon one of the sand banks and lain there until morning, when a coal vessel, passing as the coal vessels often did pass, very near to the coast, might have taken her on board and given her a passage to Australia or London, according to the direction in which they happened to be sailing. Strange things had sometimes happened, of persons

floated out to sea and keeping the life in them for hours and even days, until relief came. A kinder grave might be in store even for Hagar Winter than the shells and slime and tangle of the ocean floor.

Only in that case she would certainly have come back to her foster-child. She would never have lost sight of her for ten long years. She would never, having loved her through the helplessness of childhood with a love which, now that Opal was old enough to appreciate it, seemed indeed so true and devoted, have left her alone, not knowing with whom she might find a home, or who would care for her any more. That was not Hagar Winter's way. Opal felt that having loved her once, her foster-mother would love her to the end, whatever that end might be.

Or, perhaps reason had failed again, and she was somewhere in restraint. She had friends in London, decent, respectable people, who

under such circumstances would attend to her; for her attacks were never violent, and always yielded, after a month or two, to gentle treatment. Or—for Opal in her own loneliness clung to anything which might make Hagar Winter's death less likely—perhaps she had been rescued by some outward-bound vessel, and being taken on board by the Captain, had accompanied the ship to some far distant place. If she happened to cling to one of the loose pieces of timber which were often drifted into the mere from Mr. Lester's farm-buildings, it might carry her miles out into the sea, within sight of ships that were rounding the headlands beyond Pondgate. And when once she got away, she might not be able to work her passage home again, or even to let them know where she was. At any rate, there was a chance, a faint, feeble, glimmering chance that somewhere Hagar Winter was living still, and that somehow she and

her foster-child would meet again. And Opal brooded over that thought, until it almost strengthened into conviction.

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CHAPTER VIII.

HAY-TIME passed over. Bands of Irish labourers came trooping into Morris-thorpe village to be hired for harvest work. Miss Armitage, who had great faith in prayer when anything was to be gained by it, kept praying that Sister John might get well again; but Sister John did not get well again. Instead she lingered on, getting, if anything, gradually worse and worse; falling, at last, into that state in which, as the doctors said, she might go at any time.

Of course, whilst Mr. Armitage's wife was in that state that she might go at any time, Mr. Armitage's sister was in that state that

she could not go at all, however much she desired to do so, for the purpose of acting as a disposing providence in Lancelot's matrimonial affairs, which she was quite sure would be put into so much better order if only she could attend to them in person. But the more Sister John was wanted to get better, the more she kept on getting worse, although she did not die, which event would have set Miss Armitage at liberty as soon as the funeral was over, and the mourning made, and the visits of condolence received.

She became so uneasy at last about the condition into which she was quite sure things were falling at Morrishorpe without her supervision, that she ventured to hint to Mr. Armitage the advisability of a speedy return to the legitimate sphere of her labours. But Mr. Armitage did not see it in that light. He thought that a brother's children were quite equal to a sister's children, particularly

when the sister's children were grown up and able to take care of themselves,—Lancelot's aunt had not of course been able to explain the peculiar circumstances which rendered her presence desirable—whereas the brother's children were at that tender age when a mother's care is absolutely needful, or at any rate such a substitute for it as Miss Armitage was so admirably qualified to give.

Indeed Mr. Armitage seemed disposed to look upon his sister's return to Morristhorpe, if she had quite made up her mind to return, as a plain dereliction from the path of duty; and certainly, as he represented the matter to her, it would have been a most unwarrantable dereliction from the path of profit. So that worthy lady, who could better afford to forfeit the good graces of her poverty-stricken brother-in-law, Mr. Guildenstern, than those of her wealthy, prosperous and liberal brother Mr. Armitage, if one or the other must really

be forfeited, consented to remain in Liverpool until such time as it should please Providence to restore Sister John to the active supervision of her family.

Lancelot had been at home for two whole weeks, during every day of which time Gilbert Lester had contrived, on some pretext or other, to stroll over to Morristhorpe village green, and linger, sometimes in the garden, sometimes in the orchard, sometimes in the little sitting-room whose windows opened down to the lawn; no matter where, so long as Eulie was in sight. And she would listen with shy, wondering delight to his romantic stories of a settler's life in the Canadian clearings, stories of escape and adventure, which Gilbert told with such quaint simplicity, never seeming to think that there was anything marvellous in them, or that he had done more than any other man would have done when he braved scalping and tomahawking to hunt

through the forest for a missing comrade; or when, night after night, he slept out in the open prairies, with watch-fires round him and his gun at his side, in readiness for the wild buffaloes who might come tearing down upon him.

“And did they ever?” said little Eulie.

“Yes, Miss Eulie,” replied Gilbert, starting much more nervously at the sound of that sweet voice than he would have done if a whole herd of buffaloes had come down upon him in the midst of the prairie.

“Oh! how awful,” and Eulie shuddered. “Is a buffalo a very terrible thing; and what *did* you do?”

“Well, I just knocked him over, Miss Eulie, and he never tried it again.”

“Oh! Mr. Gilbert, how very brave you must be! I should have been ever so frightened. It is so nice to be brave. I mean I do like a man to be brave.”

At which simple little speech of Eulie's Gilbert blushed like any schoolboy; and then, crushing down his hat over his forehead, stammered out,

"I—I think I had better be going."

Though, as soon as he was fairly out of the garden gate, he would have given almost anything to be back again, within sight of that bonnie little girlish face, and to feel the touch of that tiny hand, and to hear that sweet voice say—

"Oh! Mr. Gilbert, how *very* brave you must be."

Gilbert only wished he was brave enough to tell her all he thought about her; he only wished he could throw all his shyness and awkwardness overboard, and ask her to come to him, his own darling, out of all the world. But he could not for the very life of him do that yet. The more he loved her, the farther away she seemed to be from him.

For Eulie's foster-sister too, those were brighter days than she had hoped for. The absence of Miss Armitage was sufficient in itself to lift a dark cloud from her life, inasmuch as it left her free from the disturbing influence under which she could neither speak nor act with any freedom. She felt for a little season that she was not a positive nuisance to anyone in the house ; and though that may seem only a very negative sort of happiness, still it was a happiness to which poor Opal could not always attain.

As for Lancelot, she had prepared herself to meet him as a stranger, nothing more than a stranger ; and she expected from him only what it had been her lot to meet with from most other strangers—first courtesy, then misunderstanding, then coldness, finally indifference.

That was generally Opal's experience with new people. There was a charm of freshness

and originality about her at first, which, if only she felt at ease enough to be natural, pleased them. Then some sudden turn of thought, some unexpected cross current in that mental atmosphere which was ever shifting and changing about her, baffled them, produced a variation, perhaps only a very slight variation, in their manner towards her ; and that, though it might only be the change of a tone, the absence of a looked for smile, the withholding of a word, an averted look, her quick sensitiveness seized upon at once ; seized upon it the more readily as her heart was the more interested. Her confidence shut up like a flower when the first shade of evening falls ; she became cold, restrained, uninteresting. She fancied they had changed because they were tired of her, or because she had offended them. And then those who would have cared for her turned away to some brighter, more agreeable acquaintance,

leaving Opal with faith shaken, trust wounded, more ready than ever to shut herself up from everybody, but little Eulie, who alone never misunderstood her.

Lancelot was fond of painting. He had his father's love for it and appreciation of it; cultured by more acquaintance than his father had ever had with the best specimens of art, both in Germany and England. That was one taste which he and Opal possessed in common, and it furnished a subject for conversation, in which, as there was no personal feeling involved, she could get on very well. She could put away the mistrust and shyness then. She could lay aside the quick pride which was so ready to be wounded, whilst she and Lancelot talked over their favourite painters, and he told her about the treasures of the London and Dresden galleries, those great, world-famous pictures whose dim reflections she had only

seen as yet in the photographs and engravings. Opal's face lighted up then. That love for art, which, when it had room to grow, would become the ruling power of her life, shone out through her clear expressive eyes. No one would have known her then, bright, animated, interested as she became, for the shy, cold girl who could, if chafed or ruffled by some unexpected slight, entrench herself behind such an impenetrable armour of pride and reserve.

She never spoke to Lancelot of those early days; never by any chance word led his thoughts back to that happy time when they used to wander hand in hand through the land of promise from which Bessy Dobbinson had driven them. For she thought he had forgotten them, and she was too proud to bring them back to his remembrance. And he was as silent over them to her; for he, too, fancied they had passed out of her memory. His

was a nature quite as proud as hers, quite as reserved, as slow to show its wealth of faithfulness and affection, as quick to close up at the touch of fancied coldness, or the chill of indifference. Much bitterness had worked itself into both their lives; into his, the bitterness of straitened means and altered position, into hers, the bitterness of loneliness and misunderstanding. And it needed more sunshine than either of them had felt as yet, to cast out that bitterness or ripen it into the wholesome sweetness which comes with the gentle summer after cold and frost.

But her quick ardour pleased him; her true love for her work, her rare unconsciousness of merit in it. Perhaps still more she pleased him by the eagerness with which she listened to all that he could tell her, and the humility with which she took such help as he could give, not out of his larger knowledge of art, but his larger opportunities of studying it.

Soon no hours were so pleasant to him as those which he spent in Opal's little painting-room, she working from the copies the Cardington master had given her, or colouring some rough sketch which she had made out of doors; he describing to her the glorious pictures which one day, when her dreams of London or Continental study had come true, she should see and rejoice over for herself. Lancelot wondered then how his aunt could have said so little to him about Opal; only just mentioned her now and then in a casual, uninterested sort of way, lamenting her plainness and awkwardness, and the painful contrast which her manners presented to those of his sister Eulie.

Certainly they were very different, but with a difference which only seemed to bring out the distinctive fitness of each. That fine quick sensitiveness of Opal's, true outcome of the artist temperament, was just as true and native to her as the innocent, *naïve* trust-

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fulness which made little Eulie so bewitching. And as for beauty, no one would ever think of calling Opal pretty; but to have called her plain, when, listening to him sometimes, she pushed her rippling black hair away from her forehead, and her clear grey eyes flashed so gloriously, and her pale face was glowing with enthusiasm, would certainly have been a much greater mistake. She was just one of those girls who, when her real life had room to come out, would grow into a glorious, noble woman; such a woman as those old painters had in their thoughts when they conceived the pictures before which all Europe wonders; bright, quick, flashing, intelligent—so different from the meek, washed-out, insipid beauties which in London drawing-rooms had wearied him so often with their creamy amiability and tedious prettiness.

And then Lancelot wondered if Opal ever thought of the old days, when she, a weird,

elfish little girl, first came to live with them, and used to go into such glorious rages with Bessy Dobbinson, who never could understand her or get along with her. Did she ever remember how, when the early autumn evenings set in, before he went away to Germany, they all used to cluster round the nursery fire, having first got rid of Bessy, to tell ghost or fairy tales, Gilbert always sitting by Eulie's side to quiet her if she began to scream; and how, when the story became very terrible, Opal, who never screamed, only shivered and trembled, would gradually creep closer and closer up to him, and sometimes put her little cold hand into his? He was always glad when Gilbert made the story very terrible, it was so pleasant to feel that little hand groping for his in the gloom, and then to take it and hold it fast, so fast that it could not tremble any more.

And did she ever think, now that she was

so beautiful and so graceful, of those old happy times, happy to him, at least, when Bessy Dobbinson used to tease and mock her for being such an ugly little elf; and she, with the tears in her eyes, rushed away to some shady corner of the orchard, where, if he followed her, he was sure to find her curled up amongst the hemlock and bracken, like some little wounded creature, her face to the ground, her tears rolling down upon the leaves. And then he would comfort her, and tell her that he did not think she was ugly at all, but it was Bessy that was ugly, and hateful, and a Midianite; and that if she liked he would knock Bessy down and hit her for being so stupid and disagreeable. And at last the poor little tearful face would be lifted, all wet and stained, and the cold hands used to come trembling round his neck; and Opal seemed to forget all her troubles in a long close loving hug of

childish confidence. Did she ever think of this?

Lancelot had not been many days at home before he began to hope she did.

CHAPTER IX.

“MAY I come in?”

It was Eulie who asked this question, at the door of Opal's painting-room, one bright June morning when Lancelot had been at home for two or three weeks. After Opal had given the word of welcome, the bonnie, *petite* figure came dancing in like a sunbeam, followed, as a sunbeam generally is followed, by a shadow; the shadow this time being Lancelot himself, who, however, looked like anything but a shadow, so far as the face of him was concerned, if he chanced to get half an hour's spell of chat with Opal in that picture-lined sanctuary of hers.

It was a pretty little room, looking out over the back-garden and orchard, with Virginian creepers twining over its one latticed window, and pencilling their delicate outlines upon the green curtain which for artistic purposes shaded it. A few lithographs hung upon the walls, not by any means costly, for Opal had never as yet known the comfort of a well-filled purse; but still such as the eye might love to rest upon—chiefly landscapes, with one or two pictures of old Elizabethan mansions, which Opal had cut out of the *Illustrated News*, to help her in a picture of Morristhorpe Grange which she was painting just now, and unfinished studies of which lay about the room. Eulie always called that studio the wren's nest, because of the daintiness and neatness of its appointments, and the exceeding smallness of its dimensions, Opal being able, as she stood at her easel in the middle of the room, to reach anything

from the four sides of it with perfect convenience.

She was standing at her easel now, putting some shadows into the background of the old Grange. She might have been a Countess for the grace with which she wore the plain brown holland dress, relieved only by a bunch of flowers in its girdle, which in consequence of their limited private resources, was the usual summer-morning costume of the doctor's daughters. . Indeed Eulie, who had become very proud of her foster-sister, used to say that she should not be at all surprised if some day a duke and duchess came to claim her as their own, and take her away to some grand castle or mansion, from which a spiteful fairy had changed her in her babyhood. Such things did happen sometimes in story-books ; and of course they must have happened in real life too, or the people would never have

thought of putting them into story-books.

“And perhaps, Opal,” she said, as she pushed aside the unfinished pictures to make room for herself and Lancelot, “perhaps that is the very reason why you are so fond of painting grand old houses, with moats round them, and parapets and balustrades, and lordly elms, and all the rest of the things which go with those fine ancestral places. But I do wonder, don’t you, Lancelot, that Opal should fix upon Morris-thorpe Grange as a subject; just the very place of all others that we have most reason to hate and detest. You know if it had not been for that horrible Captain Darque that Aunt Fanny is always calling out against, I might have been ever such a fine lady; and you too, Opal, instead of having to wear these old brown holland frocks, and use bunches of flowers for brooches. Lancelot, shouldn’t you like to see her

dressed like a real Countess, as I dare say she is, only we don't happen to know it, with a velvet train and a lot of point lace, and her hair done up this way, look."

And Eulie, jumping on a pile of old stretchers, gathered up a handful of Opal's rippling black hair, and massed it into a great coil at the top of her head.

"There, that's just like the picture of one of the Darque ladies that hangs up in the corridor at Morristhorpe Grange, regularly spoiled with the damp. Oh! you stupid, you've gone and shaken it all down again, and it did suit you so well. I don't believe, Opal, you know half how beautiful you are."

"Eulie, how *can* you chatter so?"

"Because I don't feel as if I could do anything else this morning. Do put that old Grange away, and let us all go and have a swing in the orchard. I can't think

whatever pleasure you have in poking over it from morning to night."

"It was once my home, you know, Eulie," said Opal, with a touch of unconscious sadness in her voice.

"Yes," Lancelot replied, "and that is the only reason I care about it."

"Ah! you naughty Lancelot, you have just gone and taken the words out of my mouth. I was going to tell Opal the very same thing, that we should regularly hate the old place if she had not once lived there. Oh! how I do remember climbing up the moat side that summer, ever so many years ago, when it was quite dry, and getting a peep of you through that rusty old gate. What a funny looking little girl you were then, with such wide open grey eyes, and your hair always in a mess. And such a dirty pinafore you used to have, sometimes."

"Eulie, *don't*. I'll put a great splash of this

neutral tint on your cheeks if you talk such nonsense."

"I don't care if you do. I can easily wash it off again. And you used to get into such passions if anything vexed you. Oh! how you did astonish Bessy Dobbinson about the cherries. If I live to be ever such an old woman, I shall never forget how she looked when you called her a Midianite, and all the rest of it."

"Eulie, *do* give over." And a rosy flush began to kindle over Opal's cheeks, not for shame at the recollection of that childish outbreak of passion, but because its memory lay so near those other memories of Lancelot's love and kindness. And Lancelot himself was standing by her now. She felt his eyes upon her. He might have forgotten all about that boyish fancy himself, or have learned to be ashamed of it. Should he know that she remembered it still?

But Eulie was in one of her maddest, merriest moods this morning, and would not be said nay by either Opal or Lancelot.

“Well, I’m sure it’s all true enough,” she persisted laughingly, “and I don’t know that there was any harm in it. It was just the unrenewed state, as the Catechism says. Oh, and you used to be so troublesome too, about learning that Catechism. But don’t you remember, Lancelot, you always used to say you liked her better for being so stormy. I suppose that was because you used to be so quiet when you were a small boy.”

And Eulie, from her diminutive feminine altitude, looked up with such a pretty air of patronage to the “small boy,” who had shot up now into even more than usual manly proportions. Lancelot matched his father for height, and Rupert Guildenstern was one of the tallest men in Morristhorpe parish.

“And then that tiresome old Bessy Dobbin-

son," continued Eulie, heedless of the rich colour which kept deepening on Opal's face, "what a scold she was! They say Ben Bletchley is very unkind to her sometimes, now, and I'm sure she deserves it, for all the disagreeable things she used to say to you. Don't you remember, Opal, how she used to persecute you about Lancelot, because he took such care of you? And don't *you* remember, Lancelot, when you used to set off after her into the orchard where she always—"

"Eulie, *Eulie*!"

And Opal's eyes flashed so brightly upon Eulie, that the little maiden, who was chattering on with the most perfect innocence, stopped short, thinking that Opal perhaps did not like to be reminded of the time when Bessy Dobbinson called her plain and ugly and ill-tempered. Lancelot too, looking keenly down upon her all the time, noticed that sudden flash, and for just one moment their eyes met

in a quick lightning glance of mutual understanding. It was only for a moment, but it was enough to reveal what each thought the other had forgotten.

“Eulie,” he said playfully, thinking to cover Opal’s evident annoyance and embarrassment—for that she was both annoyed and embarrassed showed itself plainly enough in the quick nervous way with which she handled her brush and palette now—“Eulie, you are just nothing but a little chatter-box. I think you must have changed very much, I won’t say whether for better or worse, since those days when Gilbert Lester used to declare that he liked you so much for your quietness. You were such a dear, inoffensive little creature, he used to say—don’t *you* remember——”

Little Miss Eulie collapsed. It was her turn to be embarrassed now. Perhaps she wished that Opal had fulfilled her threat, and put a splash of neutral tint upon the

cheeks which were glowing so painfully. But just at that moment she happened to remember that the roses in the garden wanted attending to; and so, with a blushing confusion, which abundantly betrayed how Lancelot's arrow had hit the mark, she darted away out of the room, leaving her brother and Opal to their own devices.

Her face was turned from him, bent low over her easel, that he might not see the changeful hues which came and went upon it. Opal was like her name-jewel, beneath whose calm, pure, transparent whiteness, the flame tints burn and glow sometimes with such fiery lustre. Those words of Eulie's had roused all the pride and defiance of her nature. Why had the child spoken them? Why had she forced upon Lancelot's recollection a past which he would so much rather not have remembered, and, which was more humiliating still, wrung from her that

expression of annoyance which betrayed that she did remember it? Oh! if Eulie would but have been quiet, or if she herself had had self-possession enough to make a joke of the whole affair, to have laughed it off as Lancelot had done, as though it had indeed been but a childish folly, quite passed and done with, like the anger, and the passion, and the fitful petulance of those early days!

And yet, mingling with the red flame-glow of her resentment, there quivered, like the sunset tints of the opal gem, the soft sweet lights of a memory that would not pass away. She remembered the childish love which used to be so precious, the sense of safety and protection which closed her round when Lancelot was near, the perfect peace which brooded over her when, in the autumn nights, she, the little pale-faced alien, used to creep up to him and steal her hand

into his, to feel it held there so fast and warm. And, more sacred still, that instinct of childish innocence and pride, making her shut out his name from the prayers which had to be said at Bessy Dobbinson's knee, and speak it only to the "Gentle Jesus" in the silence of her own heart. Were such memories as these ever to be laughed over, turned into a joke? Could the life ever die out of them so sadly, so completely? No.

Yet Lancelot had forgotten, for he could laugh over them. And then the fiery opal glow burned out again over the purple of those tender memories, flushing up through the clear milk-white paleness of her cheek. He had ceased to care for that which she would have fain cherished. And she had betrayed to him her cherishing of it. What every impulse of pride and honour would have concealed, Eulie's unfortunate speech had wrung from her; and now Lancelot

would pity and gently scorn her, as men do scorn women who are willing to give more than they are willing to receive.

She stood there silent, trembling. That sudden rush of pride and indignation quite swept out of her mind any chance remark which might have served to break the awkward pause consequent upon Eulie's abrupt departure. Opal, at the best of times, was never expert at coining small talk, but anything which jarred upon her as this unlucky *contretemps* had done, forced her into absolute silence. She could only stand there at her easel, apparently working most industriously at the shadows behind the old Grange, but in reality spoiling the whole picture, as Lancelot could see well enough, and as she would find out for herself next morning, when in a calmer mood she came to continue her work.

Lancelot watched her, unnoticed himself,

for she had resolutely turned herself away from him. He knew she was vexed and ill at ease. He could tell it by the fitfulness with which she worked, by the quick, impatient way in which she would stop sometimes to push back her picture, or adjust the pins of her easel. He was glad to see her so. He knew now that she remembered. Those childish memories, almost forgotten by him since manhood had given him a standing place in the world, but newly quickened into life now by the sight of Opal, wearing under all her maiden beauty the fitful sweetness and impulsiveness, the mingled tenderness and defiance of the old times, had been kept in her heart, and could stir and move her even yet. That she turned from him now, that she was too proud to let him see that which yet she was too natural entirely to conceal, only showed her the same as of old; only revealed how truly the child heart, shy, wil-

ful, resistant, yet faithful as ever, beat under the womanly reserve which would not now let her show, as then she did not fear to show, all that was hidden away in it.

“Opal, you have not forgotten,” he said, at last, trying to speak carelessly as he took up one of her pictures and began to criticise it. For there was an ever-ready sensitiveness about her, which made it dangerous to assume too much. Even a look or a tone which took for granted more than she was willing to allow, would make her shut up within herself directly.

Opal flashed her face round upon him for an instant, with a look of anger shining through the tears in her eyes. What right had he to wound her still more by commenting upon the vexation which Eulie’s words had occasioned? Enough that she had been made to betray herself. It would have been

kinder, more generous in him, to let that betrayal pass without remark ; to speak of something else, the merest triviality, just to make her believe, even if it was only a make-believe, that he had not seen her vexation.

“I—I never told you that I had not forgotten.”

“No. But you *might* tell me, though. I should like to know it.”

And though Opal had turned away again, she knew that he was looking at her, criticising her. He spoke so quietly, too, as if commanding what he had a perfect right to expect.

That ruffled Opal still more. She was far too proud to tell him what ought first to be told by him. If he had acknowledged to her just then that he did indeed remember that dear old time, that the sight of her had quick-

ened into warm sweet life again the memories of their childhood, then she might, if not by word, at least by the mute confession of that tell-tale face of hers, have owned the same. But not till then. And it seemed to her unjust that he should try to find out what she thought, before he had told her what he thought himself.

She made no reply. Love and pride and defiance were all striving together in her heart. There was another long awkward silence. Lancelot broke it again.

"It is time for me to go now. I said I would drive papa his rounds. I was to meet him at the Grange. Will you walk as far with me? You said you wanted to see it in sunlight before you finished your painting."

"No, thank you," said Opal, coldly. "I will keep to the shadows this morning."

“Don’t keep to the shadows always,” replied Lancelot as he went away.

But Opal said nothing.

CHAPTER X.

ON his way to the Grange, Lancelot met Gilbert Lester tramping away from the Mere farm across the bit of waste land that led to Morristhorpe road.

“Good morning, Lance,” he said, a smile lighting up his honest English face; which smile, indeed, since his return from Canada, appeared to require no special circumstance to call it forth—bright, warm, genial as the July sunshine on his father’s richest meadow lands. “Good morning, Lance. I was coming down your way to have a bit of talk with you. I haven’t had a quiet talk with you I don’t know when.”

“Never since the day before yesterday, Gilbert; but, you see, I’m not at home this morning. I’m going to drive the doctor on his rounds. Will you come along with me until I meet him? He was to be somewhere about this side of the Grange.”

“Oh! thank you. No, I don’t think I will. You’re very kind, but——”

And Gilbert began to fumble about with both hands in the pockets of his shooting-coat, a sure sign that he did not know exactly what he wanted to say.

“I—or, at least, perhaps the doctor might be at home if I went straight away there.”

“No, he might not,” said Lancelot. “He’s coming from the other end of the village. He’s gone to see the gamekeeper’s wife, who got run over yesterday, and he told me to have the trap here for him at eleven.”

“Then there’s nobody at home?”

"Nobody except the two girls, and I know they're neither of them going out. At least, they told me they weren't, half an hour ago," said Lancelot rather bitterly, remembering the conclusion of his interview with Opal. "And so, as it's no use going on, you may as well come alongside and drive on with me until I meet father."

"No, no, thank you; perhaps I'd better not. I don't know exactly what I'll do, but I don't think I'll go with you this morning, much obliged."

And Gilbert Lester whistled up his dog, and set off down the Morrishorpe road at a pace which indicated that he knew well enough where he was going, if he did not exactly know what he was going to do when he got there.

He struck into the shady path which led to the orchard gate, past the old house behind the chestnut trees. He always used to

go that way, instead of knocking at the front door and being admitted like a regular visitor; for Eulie was generally to be found out of doors in the orchard, or amongst the flower-beds, and he could have her all to himself. Which was such a delightful state of things, although he could never think of anything to say to her; or rather he could think of plenty to say, but something always seemed to keep him from saying it.

Eulie was sitting in the swing under the old lemon pippin tree. She had gone there with the rosy colour flushing in her face, when Lancelot's unconscious words, striking too near the mark, sent her out of the study half an hour ago in such a wonderful hurry. Of course she was thinking about Gilbert as she went, and the thought was still in her innocent little heart, and the colour which that thought called up had not quite faded out of her cheeks when Gil-

bert, coming up to the orchard gate, caught sight of her.

“Good morning, Miss Eulie.”

“Good morning, Mr. Gilbert. I was just thinking about you.”

Gilbert’s heart beat with delight to think that he, whose thoughts were all for Eulie, should find a place in hers sometimes.

“I’m sure that’s very good of you, Miss Eulie; but you know they say one good turn deserves another, and I very often think about you. I saw Lance, and he told me you were at home.”

“Yes. I’m not often anywhere else,” said Eulie, crossing her little feet, and swinging leisurely to and fro. “But don’t you remember, Mr. Gilbert, you made me a promise ever so long ago that you would give me a swing? Have you plenty of time this morning?”

Gilbert was over the gate in a second,

and by Eulie's side, arranging the ropes, over which he spent a great deal more time than was absolutely needful. But Eulie had been playing with them, and pulled them into a knot, and she offered to help him to undo it; and whilst her little fingers were playing about his great paws with such soft delicate touches, Gilbert was not likely to be very expert in his movements.

"There you are," he said at last, when all was right for starting. "Are you sure you are quite safe? Shall I lift you on a little farther?"

"No, you shan't," said Eulie, pushing herself back from him. "I can do very well by myself. Is Mrs. Lester better?"

"I don't know. Oh, yes, she's quite well now, thank you? And how is Miss Opal? I didn't see her, you know, last time I was here. I haven't seen her for a long time."

"Haven't you? Oh! no, I remember; she

goes so often to Cardington about her painting. Would you like to go and see her now? Because, if you would, I'll tell her."

And Eulie was going to spring down. Mischievous little puss! did she really think that Gilbert wanted Opal to come just then and there; or was she only trying her power over that guileless, honest-hearted young fellow, who could face a raid of wild red Indians more bravely than one look from those hazel eyes of hers? But no. Eulie was too innocent for any such coquettish ways. She only said it for that touch of shyness which of late had made her a little afraid of being alone with Mr. Lester. They were just beginning to know that they loved each other, and the knowledge was bringing its own unrest.

But Gilbert had no notion of letting her set off to look for Opal in that way.

"Oh! no, I don't care about her at all.

At least, I mean, you know, she is all very well, but I can see her some other time. And if you spring down in that way, Miss Eulie, you'll hurt yourself, and then——"

"And then you'll say, 'I told you so.' Some people are so fond of saying, 'I told you so.' Now, please begin to swing me, Mr. Gilbert, as high as ever you like. I'm not a bit afraid now of swinging ever so high."

Gilbert began, but it was wonderful how frequently the ropes required adjusting, and how closely he had to bend down over little Eulie to get them into their proper place. And sometimes, gazing into her fair face, and thinking of all that he would have her become to him, he forgot the swinging altogether, and just looked at her in a sort of waking dream, longing, and yet afraid to tell her all he thought.

"You don't swing me so very high, after all," said Eulie, a little impatiently. "Lance-

lot swings me a great deal higher than this. And so does——”

Eulie stopped to watch a butterfly that was sunning itself on a lichened twig of the old lemon pippin-tree.

“So does who?” asked Gilbert, feeling just as if a great black extinguisher were coming down upon him. The thought that anyone else should have the privilege of swinging Eulie as he was swinging her now, or should come so near to her bright, soft loveliness, was almost more than he could bear. And yet why should he think he was the only one in Morrishorpe who had learned to prize that loveliness; and was there any reason why Eulie should not enjoy being swung by some one else just as much as by himself? Nay, what was there in him, rough, slow of speech, unschooled in all gentle manners, as now with the quick distrust of love he felt himself to be, that she, this

fair, fresh, dainty little creature should care for him, should even let him do anything for her. She seemed so far away from him, he felt so rude and awkward in her presence. And yet how the thought of any one else being to her what he would fain have been, hurt the heart, which, with all its roughness, was yet so tender and so true.

“And so does papa,” said Eulie, when the butterfly had flown away. “He swings me ever so much higher than you do. I believe you think I’m afraid.”

With a great sigh of relief, Gilbert began pulling away again at the ropes; but that thought had been too painful for him to get the better of it all at once, and he was silent for some time.

“Don’t you feel glad Lancelot has come back again?” said Eulie, after a while.

Gilbert started. The words had fetched him up out of such a deep well of thought.

"I—I don't know. Yes, I suppose I am. I daresay he likes being at home again. A fellow naturally does when he's been away a long time. I know I do."

"Do you? Do you like this better than Canada?"

"Oh! don't I? I wouldn't go back again to Canada now for anything, unless——"

"Unless what?"

Gilbert wanted to say, "Unless you would go with me," but the words would not come out.

"Unless—I mean unless things were very different to what they are now."

"No, of course not," said Eulie. "You would not like to leave your father and mother again. And don't you think Lancelot is very much improved? I think he is quite handsome now; and I never thought that before. He is really so very different to—to some people, you know."

“Yes,” said Gilbert, rather sadly, thinking of his own broad build and general air of sturdy British commonplaceness, and contrasting them with the slight, tall figure and finely-chiselled features and courtly bearing of Lancelot Guildenstern. “He *is* very different to—to——”

“Oh! I don’t mean that he is very different to anybody in particular; but just you know he *is* different to people in a general way. For instance now, you know he is so much handsomer than young Mr. Freestone.”

“Yes,” said Gilbert, emphatically, delighted to know that Eulie did not consider young Mr. Freestone so very overpowering. “I do think he is a *great* deal handsomer than young Mr. Freestone.”

“Or Miss Mansfield’s brother either,” continued Eulie, rocking herself carelessly backwards and forwards, and looking up into Gilbert’s face from time to time, as the mo-

tion of the swing brought her nearer to him. "I do think Miss Mansfield's brother is such a very stupid fellow—don't you?"

"*Yes*. I do think he is very stupid indeed," said Gilbert, more emphatically than before.

"And so is the curate. I don't care a bit for him. I believe he thinks about nothing but holding a mallet gracefully, and having his bands nicely starched. I wonder what he would do out in Canada, where they have to hunt buffaloes, instead of playing croquet, and don't have any starch for their bands at all. Now, Gilbert—oh! I mean *Mr.* Gilbert!—don't you think he is very stupid?"

"Please don't call me Mr. Gilbert. It sounds a great deal nicer without the 'Mr.' Yes, I *do* think he is very stupid."

Gilbert said that more emphatically than ever. He would have been quite content for the conversation to have gone on in this

style until it had embraced all the Morris-thorpe exquisites, and landed them safely and for ever beyond the pale of little Eulie's good graces. Indeed, her next remark seemed to bring matters very near that point of desirableness—

“Most of the people here are very stupid. I don't care for them a bit. Don't you think so too, Mr. Gilbert?”

Mr. Gilbert did think so, and expressed his assent with vigorous animation, taking it for granted that Eulie, in common with most other well-bred people, excepted present company. On any other conditions he would, of course, have hesitated a little.

“But you are not swinging me a bit,” she continued, with an impatient tap of her little foot on the grass. I have had to keep myself going for ever such a time, and I don't like it. Why don't you swing me ever so high?”

"I beg your pardon," and Gilbert set to work with fresh energy. "But—but don't you think you've been swinging long enough? You know it isn't at all a good thing to keep on at it. You might perhaps make yourself ill."

"Perhaps I might," said Eulie, coming to a sudden halt. "I think I had better go back to Opal."

But that was not what Gilbert meant at all. He wanted to have Eulie close beside him, not flashing past into the apple-tree branches every now and then, almost as much out of reach as the robins and sparrows that were chirping so merrily overhead. If they could only have been tramping through his father's plantations now, amongst those dear old brakes and briers, which would make her keep near to him, for fear of being knocked over and hurt.

"No, no, Miss Eulie, please don't go in!"

he said, as Eulie was careering away towards the house. "I'm sure I didn't mean that—you know I didn't mean that. I only thought—at least, you know, I'm sure your papa would say that it was a very bad thing to keep on swinging such a long time; and then you ought not to go into the house directly after, for that is just as bad. It might make your head ache. Shall we walk about a little while? I wish you would go and see the wild hyacinths in our plantation—there are such lots of them!"

"I can't. I haven't got my going-out hat on, and that plantation does spoil my frocks so. You know I have to be ever so careful, or I couldn't look nice on the money papa gives me."

"Never mind; you would look nice in anything."

"No, I shouldn't; not in scratches, at any rate, and now that I have to mend my own

things I can't afford to tear them every day. But if you don't want to go back to the house, you can come with me, and I'll show you my chickens. I've just got the dearest brood of little chickens that ever you saw. They're in a coop at the other end of the field. Aunt Armitage says she'll buy them of me when they're grown up, and then I shall have plenty of pocket-money. I think it must be so nice to have as much money as ever you want for everything, but I've never known how that feels yet."

"I hope you will some day," was all Gilbert's answer; and then they set off across Mr. Guildenstern's field to the chicken department. "I think you had better take my arm, Miss Eulie," he said, when they had stumbled for a few yards over the rough uneven ground. The Morristhorpe doctor's five-acre lot was not kept in such a creditable state as Squire Lester's fertile meadow-lands. "This

bit of ground is almost as bad as a Canadian clearing, only there are no tree trunks knocking about. If we were going across a Canadian clearing, though, I should have to carry you nearly all the way; you've no notion what queer places they are."

Eulie took his arm, and then there was a long pause in the conversation. Perhaps Gilbert's thoughts had drifted back again to Eulie's remarks on the existing state of Morristhorpe society, and the improved personal appearance of Lancelot, for by-and-by he said, and there was a grieved, repentant tone in his voice, as though the state of the case which he was setting forth involved an uncomfortable amount of personal responsibility,

"Miss Eulie, I know I'm a great rough awkward fellow."

Eulie looked right up into his face.

"Are you?" she replied very simply. "I'm sure I never said you were."

"No, you didn't, Miss Eulie, but I know it myself, and I've felt it ever so much more since I came back here. Out yonder it doesn't matter if a fellow is as shapeless as that old tower on Pondgate marsh, so long as he can stand wear and tear, and that sort of thing. But whenever I come near you, you seem so different, and you make me feel as if I was just nothing but a haystack, so clumsy and stupid."

"Never mind," said Eulie, comfortingly. "I'm sure you're not stupid, and it doesn't signify if you are as clumsy as fifty haystacks, if you are only half as useful."

"I wouldn't mind a bit, Miss Eulie, if it didn't make any difference to you. Are you quite sure it wouldn't make any difference to you, my being like that?"

"Your being like a haystack? No, I'm

sure it would not," replied Eulie, wondering why Gilbert should have become so remarkably solicitous about his personal appearance, when he never used to care a straw about it before. "I don't know why it ought to make any difference."

"Because if it would——Oh! Miss Eulie, I do wish I was like Lancelot!"

"Then I'm sure I don't. You do well enough as you are. I don't mean, you know, that you are not as good in your way as he is, but just the ways are different. What would be the use if everybody was like everybody else?"

Gilbert stripped the petals off a whole branch of wild roses before he could find an answer to that question, and even then he only blundered out something very unsatisfactory to his own mind. Then there was another pause, and more stumbling over the rough, grassy clods, and occasionally a

halting, spasmodic remark, which only made the silence after it more awkward. At last the coop was reached, and Eulie sprang away to caress the little, round, yellow, fluffy balls of down, which were tumbling about in front of it.

“Are they not dear little pets?” she said, as she held them one after another to her rosy cheeks. “Joe Bletchley says they will be worth ever so much by-and-by, because they are such a good sort. But, oh! dear, I *am* glad I came, for they haven’t got a bit of corn left. I must go and fetch them some directly.”

And away Eulie was careering again, with half-a-dozen chickens in her apron. Gilbert began to feel desperate.

“Bother the chickens! At least I’m sure I beg your pardon, they’re very pretty, and all that sort of thing, but you know it’s a very

bad thing to feed them so much. You'll make them all die, everyone of them."

"Shall I?" said Eulie, gravely, turning back again.

"Yes, so I'm sure you needn't go for any more corn. And do stay a little longer. You know I told you I shouldn't care to go back to Canada, unless——"

"Yes!—unless what?"

And Eulie looked up brightly enough, but soon bent down again over the chickens, for Gilbert had faced right round upon her, and there was a look in his eyes that she could not meet, as he went on hurriedly,

"Unless I could take you back with me, Eulie. I never cared for anyone else but you, and I never shall. Perhaps I have no right to talk to you so, and there's many a better fellow might come your way that you might be a great deal prouder of than ever you could be of me. But Eulie, you would never

find anyone to love you more; and if I have a rough heart, it's a tender one too, and I would be good to you, and spend all my life in making you happy, if only you could love me a little. Will you try, Eulie?"

Eulie looked up into his face for just one moment. Then she said, and though the words were spoken very low, they told all that Gilbert Lester wished to hear.

"I don't think I should have to *try* so very much, Gilbert."

CHAPTER XI.

OF the remainder of that happy July day, of Gilbert Lester's honest pride, and Eu-lie's shy content, what need to tell? It passed in a dream, as the time does pass after some supreme and fateful moment, from which the whole long years of life must count for joy or sorrow.

But then came the temporalities which must always follow such an important transaction as a matrimonial engagement. Because, if the two people most concerned in that transaction live in a glorious mist which shuts out from them everything but its own purple brightness, those outside have to bestir them-

selves, and rise to the necessities of the situation, and attend to a thousand and one little worldly matters of which the happy lovers are entirely oblivious.

In the first place, before anything else could be done, Miss Armitage, who was still waiting and praying in Liverpool for the speedy termination of poor dear Sister John's affliction, had to be written to, and formally acquainted with the fact of her niece's engagement to Squire Lester's son and heir. By return of post there came two letters from her, one to Eulie and one to Eulie's papa, both full of the warmest congratulation, as indeed might have been expected.

If all the world had been picked over, she said, no one could have been found so suitable in every respect—this to Eulie—as young Gilbert Lester. For he was so steady and trusty, and had always been a good lad to his parents; and as her dear mother used to say, a

good son invariably made a good husband. And she did hope dear Eulie would think very seriously now of the responsibilities of her position. For a young girl entered upon quite a new stage of life when the prospect of a matrimonial settlement lay before her. It was quite time then for her to lay aside the frivolities of youth, and give her mind to serious duties, and acquaint herself with the details of household management, and all those other matters which a wife had to take into consideration. But as she hoped to have the opportunity of private conversation with her niece before very long, she would not go farther into that part of the subject at present.

Then, she must say, it would be such a comfort to her dear brother-in-law and the rest of the family that Eulie would not have to move far away. The Mere farm, where she supposed Mr. Gilbert would settle, as she

had always understood that Mr. and Mrs. Lester intended removing to a house in Cardington as soon as their son returned home, was so delightfully near to Chesnut Cottage, only just a pleasant walk, that she would really scarcely feel she had parted from her darling niece at all. She should be able to run over and see her every day, and have her come in to them for a quiet evening, as often as Gilbert would bring her; though, perhaps, that would not be very often just at first, for no doubt he would want to keep her entirely to himself, as most young husbands did. But dear Eulie must not give way too much in that matter. She must remember that although she had taken upon herself a new sphere of duty, still the old ties remained, and must not be given up, except, &c. &c.

And then Miss Armitage, who of course knew a great deal more about such things

than all the married ladies in Christendom put together, treated Eulie to a neat little homily of the duties and immunities and responsibilities of the state into which she was about to enter, winding up the whole by a second volley of good wishes and congratulations.

To Mr. Guildenstern Miss Armitage's communications on the subject of his daughter's engagement assumed a more practical turn. She could not express to him, she said, how delighted she felt to hear of dear Eulie's good fortune. She should feel when she came back to the village that she could hold up her head with the very best people in it, now that her niece was destined to be the mistress of that splendid old house at the Mere farm, and wife of Gilbert Lester, who was well known to be one of the wealthiest young men in all the country round.

Although she must say she had always looked forward to Eulie's marrying early and well. She was one of those pretty, winning little creatures that somehow men could not resist; and she had had her eye for some time upon one or two very eligible connections in the village, who were evidently trying to insinuate themselves into her niece's good graces. But Gilbert Lester, the observed of all observers, the very expectancy and rose, if she might be allowed to quote from one of England's most famous poets, of this fair state, the owner of the best farm and the most substantial residence, and the finest prospects, both literal and figurative, in the whole neighbourhood, that really was more than she could have expected. She could only congratulate her brother upon the rare good fortune which had fallen to his daughter's lot.

She was not at all surprised, though, to

hear that young Mr. Lester pressed Mr. Guildenstern to allow an early day to be fixed for the wedding. Of course his father and mother would be anxious to retire to a quiet home somewhere as early as possible. Mrs. Lester's delicate health had long unfitted her for the management of a concern like the Mere farm house, and the reception of company, and the maintenance of such a position as the mistress of a house like that ought to assume amongst the neighbouring families. And then, too, it was not as if young Gilbert was a stranger to his future father-in-law. The young people had known each other from childhood, and the Lesters and the Guildensterns had been friends for generations past, so that there was no need for a lengthened engagement to test the young man's character, or leave room for inquiry into his position and prospects. She did hope that Mr. Guildenstern

would not make that an obstacle. There was no knowing what might occur if the young man was thwarted in his wishes, and it would be such a grievous disappointment if the affair blew over, as affairs of that kind sometimes did, when obstacles were placed in the way. And she did not think, taking all these things into consideration, that October was too early a month for Mr. Gilbert Lester to urge as the time when Eulie should become his own; though of course it left little time for preparations, and she should therefore feel herself bound by the ties of duty and affection to return home as speedily as possible, let what might happen to her poor dear sister-in law. For servants and governesses could keep the children in order, but servants and governesses could never give the advice and assistance and sympathy which dear Eulie was needing under present circumstances.

And then, with suitable congratulations and good wishes, Miss Armitage wound up this second somewhat lengthy epistle.

The next week she said good-bye to her duties at Liverpool. Sister John took a turn for the better, and having ceased to alarm her friends by the possibility of going off at any time, the doctor informed Miss Armitage that she might now with perfect safety take that privilege into her own hands. Accordingly, with the best wishes of all the family, and a magnificent brooch from Sister John, and a sealed packet containing something more valuable still from Sister John's husband, she came back again to the old home behind the chestnut trees, there to assume the providential arrangement of affairs in general, and Lancelot's in particular.

Miss Armitage, having turned the subject over in her own mind, came to the conclusion that Mr. Russell's wealthy niece was

now more than ever eligible as a mark for her nephew's matrimonial speculations. She must say she had had a little fear for his success in that quarter since she heard of young Gilbert Lester's return; and that had made her more than ever anxious to be on the spot and watch how matters were going on. For everyone knew what young Gilbert Lester's prospects were, and what a first-rate position his wife might take in the village, if she was a woman who cared for that sort of thing; and Miss Luxmore certainly was a woman who did care for that sort of thing. And though, in virtue of his profession, her nephew Lancelot stood perhaps on a higher social pinnacle than the farmer's son, and would doubtless by-and-by, when he got fairly established, be able to introduce his wife into society from which Gilbert Lester would be excluded, still money *was* a useful thing—a very useful thing, especially at

the outset of life ; much more tangible in its results than ability, or position, or the power to make oneself popular in company. Many girls, possibly Miss Luxmore among the number, would rather take the ample fortune and the country life, than Lancelot's social status along with the very scanty means which he at present possessed for sustaining the same.

But now that was all over. If Miss Luxmore had ever cherished any intentions of becoming Mrs. Gilbert Lester, she might safely lay them aside. And since, next to Gilbert Lester, there was no one in her circle of acquaintance more eligible than Lancelot Guildenstern, and since by marrying him she would achieve a family connection with the Lesters, and so share the benefit of any position which their wealth could command, it seemed the most sensible thing in the

world that the young man's steps should be guided into that track, and Miss Luxmore's thousands placed within his reach.

As for Opal, Miss Armitage had brought home a pressing invitation for her to go and spend a few weeks with Sister John in Liverpool, an invitation which she should insist upon the girl accepting, and speedily, too. She had hinted to Mrs. Armitage the necessity which existed for Opal's doing something towards earning her own livelihood; and her sister-in-law had caught eagerly at the notion of securing her services as governess to the children. Of course, now that Eulie was about to leave home, Opal's residence there was no longer a matter of necessity; and since some change had to be made, this appeared in every respect desirable. As soon as Opal's things could be prepared, she should set off for Liverpool;

and once settled down there, Miss Armitage trusted to her own devices to render the arrangement permanent.

Miss Armitage had an admirable genius for management, especially the management of other people's affairs.

CHAPTER XII.

AFTER that bright July morning, when Gilbert Lester and Eulie Guildenstern passed into the land Beulah, upon whose golden hill-tops now they wandered hand in hand, in a perfect sunshine, which seemed to glow upon their faces, so that pilgrims in the vale below might truly say with Bunyan, "having seen it, I wished myself among them"—when also Lancelot and Opal, through that momentary glance of soul and soul, passed into the Enchanted Land, where, alas! many a cloud and mist, many a snare and pitfall might await them, and full often the roll of trust be stolen from them before

all its sweet story was unfolded—after that bright July morning there were no more chats in the painting-room over the easel where that picture of Morristhorpe Grange still lay, its shadows unfinished ; its sunshine too, not yet complete.

It is a strange thing, that law of affinities in the world of mind—stranger and more curious for him who has the skill to study it than that other law of mere material affinities and repulsions with which the chemist works such wonderful transformations. Some men and women, like Gilbert Lester and Eulie, meet, touch, blend, and straightway the azure of her trust, the clear burning red of his courage, quiver into the amethyst glow of love, heaven's own colour. Others unite, enfold each other for months, for years—it may be for a whole lifetime—yet, like differently-constituted particles of metal, or oil and water in the same vessel,

never blend. Each retains its own individuality. Circumstances only, not affinities, have joined them. Fate has but to hold her magnet, and the particles disunite, yielding to a stronger attraction. The vessel has but to be left at peace for a little while; the oil rises, the water falls, each unaltered in all its properties—each pure in itself, as before. Some natures, again, have a true affinity for each other, but until a third power is brought to bear upon them, they cannot unite; they can only ruffle, jar, repel each other; but once let a skilful hand apply the magic tincture, and the new and varied and beautiful hues of a blended, harmonious life begin slowly to develop, where before all had been cold and colourless.

Lancelot and Opal were just in that restless, uncertain condition which must exist between two equally proud, sensitive, self-

dependent natures, before the magic tincture of mutual trust and confidence, poured upon both, brings them into harmony. In that quick, momentary look, the real self of each had touched the other, but touched only to jar, not to mingle. Having once touched, however, there was no going back for either of them to the former independence. The consciousness of each had been awakened; it could not be laid to rest again.

There was no meeting for them now, either, on the purely impersonal ground of tastes and pursuits common to both—tastes and pursuits about which they might converse without touching upon those sensitive fibres which were beginning to strike through both their hearts. Lancelot did try, once or twice after that eventful morning, to get up a little friendly chat with Opal about her painting; but he was sure before long to strike upon some subject which, recalling

.

Eulie's remarks, caused her to retire behind the armour of reserve, or flash out upon him with one of those quick, defiant looks which seemed to ask what right he had to thrust himself into her inner life, or, if he knew it, to insult her by letting her know that he knew. The smallest kindness he could show would be to leave the past alone.

So long as she could hold herself perfectly apart from him, all had been well. Then she had been like an earth without an atmosphere, clear and still, but cold and dark. But now that medium of mutual consciousness had arisen between her and Lancelot, in which mists and clouds could arise, and vexing shadows of doubt find room to spread themselves.

But if this mental atmosphere created mists and clouds, it also diffused the sunshine, causing it to glow with purple beauty

upon those very mists which its warmth had availed to draw from the throbbing nature beneath. And sometimes, as through a rift in Alpine clouds one sees far off the glistening, snow-capped peak of some mountain long ago scaled, or the fair expanse of fertile valleys, which have been crossed in early morning prime, so in chance moments the old sweet childish life seemed to come back upon Opal, with all its fearless, unspoken faith, its innocent unselfishness, which never cared to receive, only to bestow; which never asked for rights, or even knew it had them, but found its simple joy in loving.

Lancelot, looking upon her then, thought he had never seen so fair a face. And, not knowing yet if she did so truly remember it, he would fain have led her thoughts again to that happy past, and won from her what he so much longed to hear, the confession that it was indeed dear to her still.

But the clouds returned. A chance word, even a change in look or tone, brought back the former mistrust. A blinding mist came up between them again, through whose unkind coldness, if they touched at all, they only touched to chill each other.

It was to this exceedingly hazardous and unsatisfactory state of things that Miss Armitage came back. Came back certainly not as the harmonizing influence which, touching the two conflicting yet kindred elements, should blend them into new and perfect beauty; but rather as the unkindly acid, rousing into actual strife and repulsion those powers which were at peace so long as they held themselves apart.

She had her duty to do, and she set to work upon it with vigorous decision; all the more vigorous because the time was short. What she did must be done at once; for Lancelot was going back to London after Eulie's marriage, early in October, and Miss

Armitage had made up her mind that he should go back as the affianced husband of Miss Luxmore.

Her quick perceptions took in at once the state of the case between her nephew and Opal. She saw how he was alternately attracted and repelled by that fitful manner, now haughtily defiant, now wistful and tender. She knew that a character like Opal's, holding within it such conflicting elements, wayward, impulsive, yet so strong in its tenderness, would have singular charms for him. Lancelot would never get on comfortably with an amiable mediocrity, which would sit for ever a willing captive at the feet of his authority. He wanted something to contend with, something to conquer and overcome. Opal gave him that. He wanted variety—something to interest, puzzle, baffle him. Opal, fitful as an April day, responding to every touch of kindness or neg-

lect, roused from her coldest moods by a look of affectionate trust, frozen again into icy indifference by a misinterpreted look, gave him that too.

She knew, before she had been at home many days, that a single word from one who had the grace to speak it wisely, would have given them to each other in a bond as tender and lasting as that which joined Gilbert Lester and little Eulie. But she was not the one to speak that word; nay, the very reason for which she had come home was to prevent it from being spoken.

For what more senseless thing could Lancelot do than tie himself to a girl who brought him no other fortune than a somewhat distinguished appearance and a tolerable skill in oil-painting; a girl who had not even a name to call her own, nor a rag of position and respectability about her,

except that which Mr. Guildenstern had given her, and of which his death, or a change in his plans, might at any time deprive her? A girl with no connections either, to help him on in the world, and not a sixpence towards keeping a home over their heads during those years in which, unless he was vastly more fortunate than most young men in his profession, he must be content to wait in vain for briefs or preferment.

What a contrast to this prospect was that which lay before him as the husband of Miss Luxmore—Miss Luxmore with her unencumbered fortune of ten thousand pounds, payable into her own hands on her wedding-day, with the reversion of as many more on the death of her sickly old uncle; with her rich relations too, in London, relations whose influence would be so much to him, and whose patronage might lay the foundation of a secure

professional income, without the miserable necessity of waiting years, perhaps half a lifetime, first.

Lancelot must marry Miss Luxmore.

Mr. Guildenstern's sister-in-law was not what people call a wicked woman; she was only what people call a worldly woman. She would have been wounded beyond hope of healing if anyone had questioned the respectability of her character. She made an abundant profession of religion, so far as regular attendance upon the outward means of grace constitute that profession. She had a tract district. She subscribed to most of the village charities; and when asked to do so by the Admiral's lady, or some other influential personage, did not object to collect funds for the parish school feast, or to preside at tea-parties for poor women, who were accustomed to curtsey respectfully to her in the

street. She would have held aside the skirts of her raiment in righteous indignation from touch of one who should venture to doubt the divine inspiration of the Athanasian Creed, or build up for himself a different system of theology from that which the Reverend Adolphus Freestone inculcated upon church-going Morristhorpe twice every Sunday. She was devoted to the interests of her sister's husband and her sister's children, dismissed her servants at a moment's warning, if she detected them in a breach of what she considered the more important of the Ten Commandments, looked well to the ways of her household, and might be said, on the whole, to guide her affairs with discretion.

But her life was essentially of the earth, earthy. It was ruled by principles, and grew out of motives which never rose beyond things seen and temporal. Could she have

been transplanted suddenly into that "life everlasting," her belief of which she asserted three times a week in such clear, distinct, unwavering tones, she would have found herself in a condition for which she had not the slightest affinity. All her tastes, habits, ways of thought, would have been in direct antagonism to it. It would have been a weariness to her, a life of which she could only say "my soul findeth no pleasure therein." What she would do when the time came for her to take her departure to a state where there was no housekeeping, no managing or dismissing of servants, no opportunity for finding fault, no room for tact in the planning and contriving of marriages, no asseveration of creeds, or un-Christianizing of those who did not accept them after her own fashion, was a question which Miss Armitage might some day be called upon to consider. For,

truly, in these things her earthly life consisted; and of the diviner life which brooded above them, she took but little heed.

CHAPTER XIII.

IF Miss Armitage knew that a word would have given Lancelot and Opal to each other, she knew, too, that a word or hint dropped in a different direction would suffice to keep them apart. And even supposing that the trifling circumstance of happiness had to be considered, she did not think it would make any serious difference to the happiness of either of them, especially of Lancelot, who had his profession to interest and amuse him, and a new love ready to fall back upon, if that word was spoken, or that hint dropped.

Miss Armitage was one of those admirably

practical, common-sense women, who look upon a good social position, with plenty of money to sustain it, as the supreme end of life. That was why she had mourned so deeply over the faded fortunes of the Guildenstern family, and resented so bitterly the villany of the man through whom they had been marred. And that, too, was why she welcomed the news of Eulie's engagement, seeing in it a step towards the retrieving of the position which had been lost so many years ago. Now, if Lancelot could only ally himself with the wealthy Miss Luxmore, and by the help of her thousands secure for himself comfort and competence, and such an establishment as would command him access into good society, then the height of her ambition would be realized, and she should feel that her duty had been done to the very utmost by her poor dear sister's children.

Accordingly she set to work. Her first

move was to take advantage of a little misunderstanding which occurred between Lancelot and Opal within a few days of her return from Liverpool, and which had dashed Opal's manner towards him with a proud defiance, beautiful certainly, but very unbecoming, as Miss Armitage took occasion to remark, when she chanced to be alone with her nephew, and the conversation turned, as she intended it to turn, upon Eulie's foster-sister.

“A gifted girl, Lancelot, a very gifted girl; and with an air about her which takes anyone by storm, especially a stranger. I knew you would be charmed with her. She is just the sort of girl to make an impression on a man of cultivation; but it is such a pity she should be so spoiled by that capricious temper of hers. A good temper, you know, is everything in a woman. One can put up with these little moods and

tenses in men, for they are obliged to keep a restraint upon themselves abroad, and it would be hard if we did not allow them the privilege of firing up a little now and then at home; but for a woman to be always giving way to those sudden gusts and squalls, *does* seem to me such a pity. Indeed, of course it is sinful. I am sure you will agree with me, Lancelot, that temper *is* sinful."

Lancelot, stretched out at full length on the steps of the French window which opened to the lawn, allowed that some sorts of temper *were* sinful.

"Yes, quite sinful. We can none of us get on with Opal, except Eulie, and you know it would be impossible for anyone not to get on with Eulie, she is so deliciously sweet and gentle."

Lancelot allowed that too. But at the same time he thought, though he did not tell

Miss Armitage so, that he would rather have the splendid panther-like wildness and waywardness of Opal, than Eulie's soft, rosebud perfection. He loved something that needed to be hunted down, and tamed, before it would obey his behests, and follow him about, independent even in its submission.

Miss Armitage continued with a tone of regretful pity,

"Opal is so very uncertain. You never know where to find her. One day she is all right, and the next as cold as an iceberg. She has estranged all the Morris-thorpe people. She literally has not a friend in the place. You know that tells against a girl very much. She is so wonderfully different to Eulie."

"Yes," said Lancelot, thoughtfully. "Eulie is a dear, inoffensive little creature."

"Exactly, Lancelot. That is just what I should have said of her myself—not at

all fitted to struggle with the world, but so sweet and gentle. And that is why I am so glad she has become engaged to Gilbert Lester. You know he will be able to take her to a comfortable home at once, without the nuisance of a long engagement. There is nothing I set my face against so much as a long engagement. It should always be avoided if possible."

Lancelot did not reply. Stretched idly there upon the steps in the sunshine, he looked away over the flower-beds to the orchard, where Eulie and Gilbert Lester were strolling hand in hand amongst the tall grass. Most likely his engagement, whenever it came to pass, would be a long one, unless he waited until all the freshness of early manhood had passed, before he asked the girl he loved to link her fortunes or misfortunes with his. And few girls would choose to wait as they would have to wait for him. Opal might,

though. And if she would, those long years of toil and upward striving would seem so easy.

Miss Armitage might have known the thoughts which were passing through his mind. Some women of the world have a rapidity of perception which amounts almost to clairvoyance in such matters. At any rate the tenor of her next remarks seemed to imply that she had divined his mental processes.

“Yes; long engagements are very trying. And yet I daresay, after all, supposing it had to be done, Eulie would have waited as patiently as most girls. You know she has no violent ideas about anything—takes events so easily and quietly. I do believe, if Gilbert had told her they must wait four or five years before he could afford to settle, the dear little creature would have been as content as possible, never made a fuss about

it, and would not have become weary, either, and changed her mind before the time was half over. Now, you know, Opal is so different. There is nothing I should dread so much for Opal as a long engagement—indeed, she would not stand it. I am sure she would not. If Opal ever marries at all, she must marry out of hand at once. Unless she does so, she will be sure to quarrel, and throw up the whole affair. You see, she is so very apt to take offence. Nobody ever knows what to make of Opal. But I am quite sure of this, that she is far too impatient ever to consent to the tedium and uncertainty of a long engagement.”

Miss Armitage scanned her nephew's face keenly, to note whether this home-thrust had reached its mark. Apparently it had, for he looked moody and abstracted enough as he watched the pair of lovers strolling about in the orchard. Perhaps it would be well

to leave the arrow in the wound for a while. The pain might be troublesome just at first, but it would be salutary. So Miss Armitage left the subject of the engagement, and proceeded to put a few more darkening touches on poor Opal's character, which might still produce an effect in the same direction.

“You see, girls never get over the effects of their early training, and the life she led with that peculiar woman, Hagar Winter, before your papa was foolish enough, as I might almost say, to have her here, developed all the most unlovely traits of her disposition. I'm sure I'm very sorry for her. I always say something might have been made of her, if she had been taken in time; but her habits are formed now, and she will never eradicate them. However, she is just the sort of girl who should be left to carve her own way in life. I daresay she

will make something out. Most probably she will never marry at all. She is not qualified for home life. I shouldn't wonder at her turning out a genius some day, and geniuses are always best left to themselves. At any rate, she will never settle down to domestic peace. It is not her sort of style at all."

And with that, Miss Armitage gathered up her work, and set off to take counsel with the clergyman's wife concerning the impending school-treat, leaving Lancelot to digest at his leisure the treat of another kind which she had placed before him.

CHAPTER XIV.

PRESENTLY Opal came in with her hat on, and some sketching materials in her hand.

She took no notice of him, for only that very morning Miss Armitage, whilst speaking before her to Mr. Guildenstern about Eulie's engagement, had taken occasion to make some remarks upon Lancelot, and the great avidity with which his acquaintance was cultivated both by his old friends—a great stress upon *old* friends—and the more recent arrivals in the place. And then Miss Luxmore and her fortune had been mentioned, in a manner which left no doubt as to Miss Armitage's wishes on that subject.

Opal's over-sensitiveness took all this to herself, and it put a stiffness and restraint into her manner, which, indeed, she had never been able to shake off since Miss Armitage's return home. If she had been half wide-awake enough to her own interests, she would have accepted the state of the case, and chatted away with bright, ready indifference, carrying off any little disagreeableness by a more genial flow of small talk. But Opal was not at all wide-awake in such matters. She had not tact enough to meet Miss Armitage upon her own ground, and by apparent, if not real unconsciousness, make that excellent lady's shots as ineffectual as though fired into a down pillow.

"Where are you going, Opal?" asked Lancelot.

"To Morristhorpe Grange. I want a study of that old gateway by the moat."

"Shall I go with you?"

"I don't care. If you like."

"Because, you know, I said I would go with you some time, and I think I could contrive it now. Papa did not say anything about my going with him on his rounds, so I suppose he does not want me."

"Well, just as you please. If you can contrive it, we may as well go together."

Opal laid the slightest possible stress upon that word "contrive." If any one had used the same word to Eulie she would never have noticed it, but to Opal's quick perception it seemed to imply that Lancelot was doing her a favour by going, and her pride made her feel as if she did not want to have a favour done. It was a very little thing, but it was enough to ruffle her, to spoil what would otherwise have been a great treat, what she had been anticipating ever

since he promised it a week ago—a walk with Lancelot to Morrishorpe Grange.

However, they started, just after Miss Armitage, who certainly would not have approved of such an arrangement, had set off for a call upon the clergyman's wife.

They had not gone very far before they met young Freestone and his sister Amy in the Rectory trap, a dainty little equipage for the accommodation of three people, driving in Mr. Guildenstern's direction.

The young man raised his hat to Opal; and then, reining up the pony, said to Lancelot,

“We were just on our way to your house, to see if you would drive over to Cardington with us. Mamma wants some engravings for the breakfast-room, and I thought I should like you to help us to choose them. You see, Amy and I don't go in much for that sort of thing. It isn't in our line. But I see you're better engaged.”

And young Mr. Freestone glanced at Opal with a good-natured smile, which made her wish herself anywhere rather than on the Morristhorpe high road, by Lancelot Guildenstern's side.

Lancelot was beginning to excuse himself, but Opal interrupted him.

"Pray go, Lancelot. I would just as soon walk on to the Grange by myself."

"Would you really?" he answered doubtfully, not quite pleased to hear her express such a readiness to be relieved of his society.

"Yes. I am sure I would," she replied more decidedly than before, for she fancied he was only hesitating between his wish to go to Cardington with young Freestone and Amy, and his reluctance to behave with what might appear like rudeness to herself. "I can walk on perfectly well alone. Pray do not let me interfere, if Mr. Freestone wishes it."

Miss Amy, a bright coquettish damsel, just fresh from school in London, bent down now and put in her word.

“If Miss Guildenstern really *would* excuse Mr. Lancelot. You know we should be so delighted for both of you to go, but we can only put three in the trap, and mamma was particularly wishful for me to go, on account of some other little matters. Or else I should have been so very glad to have given up my place to Miss Guildenstern. If you *please*, Mr. Lancelot.”

And Amy cast one of her prettiest glances towards Opal’s companion.

“Thank you, Miss Amy,” he said. “You are very kind, but—well, I think I must go on this morning. I shall enjoy it very much another time. My compliments to the ladies. Good morning.”

“Oh, you *naughty* creature!”

And with another coquettish look from

Miss Amy, the friends parted company.

But Opal felt more uncomfortable than ever now. She fancied she had kept Lancelot from what he would really have enjoyed—a ride to Cardington with young Freestone and his sister. And the thought of that quenched all the brightness out of her—made her feel cold, dull, uninteresting. She just seemed under a wet blanket of reserve and misapprehension, which very soon extended its influence to her companion. For the worst of over-sensitiveness is, that it cannot be suffered alone; the chill of it gradually creeps out and creates an atmosphere of uncomfortable-ness all around.

Lancelot felt it. It kept him from making himself agreeable; and when a man comes under that influence, he naturally takes up along with it a feeling not exactly kindly towards the individual who has produced it.

“I believe you did not want me to come with

you, after all," he said, rather brusquely. "You would just as soon be without me."

"No, I would not," replied Opal. "I am very glad for you to come."

"Then why don't you talk to me?"

"I don't know; perhaps for the same reason that you don't talk to me."

"But I *do* talk to you, only you always seem to let it drop directly."

"Well, I thought perhaps you were vexed about not going to Cardington."

"No, I wasn't vexed. You might have been sure that I would rather go with you, when I had told you that I wanted to go."

"When you had told me that you would *contrive* to go, you mean."

"Well, I *had* to contrive it. A fellow can't always do just as he likes. You know my father wants me to go with him on his rounds sometimes, and perhaps he may be disappointed when he comes in this

morning and finds that I am not at home."

"But I suppose you would have gone with Mr. Freestone if you had not gone with me."

"Of course I should. I wanted to get a lot of things in Cardington, and it would have been a good opportunity."

"I am very sorry I prevented you. However, I hope we shall be able to contrive better another time."

"Thank you. I shall not try to contrive anything again."

"Not a walk with me, at any rate."

"Opal, you know I did not mean that. I meant——"

"How can I tell what you mean? I can only tell that things always go wrong when we want to contrive them differently. I am sure Mr. Freestone and Miss Amy were both vexed that you did not join them."

"Opal, do, for goodness' sake, let Mr. Freestone and Miss Amy drive on in peace."

And so with this very unsatisfactory sort of conversation, this perpetual fencing and parrying of anything like confidence, Lancelot Guildenstern and Opal reached the old Grange. Gilbert and Eulie under the same circumstances, or indeed any other couple of ordinary sensible people, would have gone laughing and chatting all the way, having a right merry time of it, and feeling when it was over that the morning had only been too short for all they wanted to say to each other. Lancelot and Opal, instead, felt heartily glad when the moat which led to the rusty gateway put a termination to their walk. A vexing, chafing restraint wrapped them coldly from each other, restraint all the more vexing and chafing because they knew that a single word might have ended it, and yet they could neither of them speak that word. Lancelot felt that Opal was unjust to him, would not give him credit for wanting her company. He really began to think

that Miss Armitage was not very far from being correct when she said that Opal was better left to herself.

For he had enjoyed the prospect of that walk very much. He always liked to be alone with Opal. Though she never had much to say for herself, she listened readily, and with such evident interest to what he had to say for himself; and that was quite as good, almost better. It pleased him to please her, to be able by words of his to bring the rare smile to her face, and see her eyes flash round upon him with such keen, bright interest. But this morning, she was so utterly cold and impenetrable. She just kept making him feel as if she did not want him to be with her. Everything he said she took the wrong way, turned it into something exactly opposite to what he meant. He felt himself repulsed. His powers of conversation, powers upon which he rather prided himself, failed him entirely. He

could not think of a single clever, effective thing to say. Instead of being brilliant and interesting, he was flat and insipid; and all because of that repellent manner of Opal's which turned the edge of his words, making them fall so powerless.

Lancelot was vexed. A man can forgive anything in a woman sooner than this check which her indifference puts upon his attempts to make himself agreeable. People generally are pleased with those who make them feel pleased with themselves, and Opal was making Lancelot feel anything but that. Instead, she was baffling, bewildering him. She never even betrayed a touch of regret that it should be so. She seemed quite content that they should go on in that stupid, unsatisfactory manner.

When they reached the old Grange, things were no better. To begin, Lancelot lighted his cigar, which Opal interpreted as an in-

dication that he did not wish her to talk to him. She had heard him say to Gilbert, a day or two before, how it plagued a fellow to have to keep stopping in the midst of a good smoke to answer questions, or make remarks.

So, without asking his advice about the best point of observation, or seeking his help in arranging her materials, she chose her place, and commenced operations in silence, a silence which Lancelot in his turn took to imply a wish for quietness. Accordingly, after a few minutes of loitering and waiting, to see if he could be of any service, he crossed the moat, pushed the old gate open, and strolled into the garden, there to meditate at leisure.

Opal was too proud to recall him by the single word which he would so gladly have obeyed. Besides, what was there in her, she thought, that anyone should care for

her company? If only she had been like other girls, like Miss Luxmore, for instance, who could talk and rattle away so merrily, or Miss Amy Freestone, who had looked back upon him with such a bright smile as the Rector's trap drove away. No wonder Lancelot walked very silently on with her after that. No wonder he should keep contrasting her ways, as she felt quite sure he had been contrasting them, with those of Amy, so pleasant and pretty, and fascinating.

And then that *contriving*. How the word kept chafing and plaguing her! It would not have needed much contrivance on her part to arrange a walk with him. She should have been only too glad to put aside any of her own plans, and have given up her time to him, if she could really have felt that he cared for her society. And the very last thing in the world she would have done would have been to hint to him

that such an arrangement had needed any contrivance, or to try and make him feel that he was under an obligation to her for it.

Under such circumstances, it was to be expected that the sketch would progress slowly enough, and that very little sunshiny effect had been brought into the picture, when, after an hour's slow toil, she began to put away her materials. Lancelot had been leaning over the old stone wall, where she could not see him, watching her. What could have vexed her this morning that she was so cold and contrary? Only a few days before he could rouse her into enthusiasm, call up such a bright smile of answering interest to her face; she would talk to him with such pleasant unrestraint. Now she was as inanimate as the old house whose shadows she was so needlessly perpetuating. He could almost believe Miss

Armitage had spoken truly when she said that Opal had scarcely a friend in the village. No wonder, if she behaved to them in this way—one day bright and warm, the next chill as an iceberg. Nay, she was worse than an iceberg, for that, though cold, did reflect the sunlight in a thousand quivering rainbow tints; but Opal reflected nothing, she only steeped everything around her in her own coldness.

“Are you ready to go back?” Opal said, when the drawing materials were all put away.

“Yes,” said Lancelot, rather sullenly. “I have been ready to go back ever since we came.”

Opal could quite believe that, but still she thought it would have been kinder of Lancelot not to say so. And that thought stiffened her into silence all the way home.

CHAPTER XV.

WHEN they returned Miss Luxmore was in the drawing-room, busy over a piece of fancy work for some forthcoming bazaar; evidently settled down for a quiet day with the family. Mr. and Mrs. Russell had gone to a public meeting at Cardington, as Miss Armitage explained to her nephew, and so she had persuaded Bella to come home with her; the dear girl was looking so dreadfully moped in that great house all by herself.

Though of course Miss Armitage had known all about that public meeting at Cardington, and Mr. Russell's intention of taking his wife to it, before she stepped in, apparently quite

by accident, on her return from the Rectory. But it was advisable on the whole to make Miss Luxmore's visit a chance affair, instead of investing it with the formality of an invitation.

Bella Luxmore was a tall, fair, fully developed beauty of nineteen, lately returned from a finishing establishment in Paris, where she had acquired that ease and polish and assurance which Opal so greatly needed, and which is so invaluable to a girl whose object is to secure for herself a good settlement in life.

Miss Luxmore knew nothing about mental atmospheres. She was never troubled with them. They diffused neither golden glow nor vapour of mist and fog over the clear, hard well defined outlines of her interior economy. With a fine easy assurance she took it for granted that people were pleased with her. And really, to do the girl justice, she possess-

ed a breadth of good-nature and steady-going common-placeness which made such a state of feeling towards her quite possible, even although her unencumbered estate down in Cornwall, and her splendid property in the Wheal Marian mines, had not created an atmosphere of their own, in which the very feeblest imagination could conjure up no end of purple glory and golden cloudland. Of course a young lady with ten thousand pounds, and reversions in proportion, is quite justified in taking it for granted that people feel an interest in her; and it is not to be expected that she should be troubled with any of the shyness, or want of assurance or mistrust of her own power to attract, which is naturally felt by those whose charms are entirely of mind and person. Miss Luxmore was not bold, she was not forward, she did not carry her great expectations with the lofty front of conscious superiority; but she

did feel herself fully equal to anyone, man or woman, with whom she came in contact; and this feeling of equality gave an ease to her manners which put other people at their ease too. And when to this ease of manner was joined a readiness to be pleased, and a self-esteem which enabled her to display to the best advantage her own internal resources, such as they were, it may easily be imagined that Bella Luxmore, the orphan niece of rich old Septimus Russell, was by no means a person to be looked down upon.

To Lancelot Guildenstern, after the repellent coldness of Opal's manner, which vexed him all the more because he did nevertheless feel himself drawn to her by an attraction which even that coldness could not destroy, Miss Luxmore's pleasant freedom was very refreshing. Here was someone at any rate who would neither baffle nor perplex him. He had

only seen Miss Armitage's favourite once or twice before, in quiet little social opportunities like the present; but she was a person who did not require much knowing. She was just the same to him the first day of their introduction as she would be three months, or three years, or thirty, after it. At once she fell into an easy conversation with him, rattling over the gaieties of London—she had spent the month of May there—the new opera singer, the star pictures of the Academy, the reigning beauties of the season, the appearance of Rotten Row, and so forth, with the self-possession of a complete woman of the world, yet with that freshness which a girl of nineteen, however accustomed to society, cannot as yet entirely have lost.

Lancelot liked to listen to her. Coming as it did just then, it was such a pleasant change to the last conversation in which he had taken

part. Not that he preferred that sort of thing for a continuance. No, give him Opal's Alpine-like variety of nature, with its sharp, defiant crags, its chasms of icy brightness, its glooms and precipices, its sunshiny rifts, rare, but so beautiful, where the sweet flowers bloomed and murmuring streams told their pleasant story, rather than Miss Luxmore's immense, unvariegated flat of uninterrupted fair weather. But still it was not unwelcome, after being almost lost in such gloom as that into which Opal had just led him, to strike out from it into a little worldly common-placeness, and tread for awhile where there was at least safe footing, if little beauty or interest.

So the day passed off very successfully. Lancelot and Miss Luxmore "getting on," as the phrase is, admirably. Miss Armitage was delighted. She had rarely seen her nephew so bright and animated. He was evidently enjoying dear Bella's society, as indeed he

might well enjoy it, after the fitful petulance to which Opal, judging from the expression of her countenance when they came in from their walk, had been treating him. Miss Armitage was very glad now that the two young people had taken it into their heads to spend their morning in that way. Lancelot could not have had a better preparation for his present companionship, than a long walk with Opal in one of her contrary moods. The defiance and coldness and awkward reserve of the one, showed off to such advantage the admirable self-possession and polished agreeableness of the other. And that Lancelot noticed the difference, and appreciated it, too, was evident from the change which passed over his whole aspect as soon as he came under Miss Luxmore's influence.

Opal stole silently away into her own little painting-room, and tears, almost the bitterest she had ever shed, filled and overflowed her eyes.

She heard Miss Luxmore's merry laugh, mingling with Lancelot's and Eulie's, as they all chatted together downstairs in the drawing-room. He could laugh then, now that she was out of the way. Cold, quiet, uninterested in her company, he could brighten into his natural self again when the restraint of her presence was removed. Yet what had she done, or how had she changed to him, that he should so change to her? Why had all the brightness died out of their friendship? Why were they strangers again—worse than strangers; for there is no strangeness so sad as that which closes over the memory of trust and love forgotten? She had done nothing; her thoughts were the same to him as when, a few little days before, his kindness made her life so bright.

Was it her fault that he had changed? It could not come back now, that old, happy brightness. She must be content to let it go as other brightness had gone before. Miss

Armitage said well that she must never expect to keep her friends. No one, Miss Armitage said, would bear with that cold distant manner of hers, that readiness to take offence. And yet had she been so very ready to take offence? Had she stood so very much upon her own rights? Had she, as Miss Armitage said, been so selfishly eager for attention? She thought not. It was her very wish to do right which had been misunderstood. She thought at the outset of their walk that Lancelot did not care to go with her. That had made her quiet, for fear of annoying him by needless talk. Then she fancied that he would rather have turned back with Amy Freestone; and that had made her feel still more uncomfortable, because she seemed to be keeping Lancelot from society pleasanter than her own.

Then, again, when he took out his cigar, and lay down on the grass, quite away

from the place where he knew she would have to sit to get the right light on that old gateway, what else could she think than that he wanted to be quiet? And yet, because she had so studied his moods and feelings, so tried to adapt herself to them as not to be burdensome to him, she was misunderstood, upbraided with coldness and reserve. The distance between them was wider now than ever it had been before. She had offended where she only meant to be kind; she had deepened a chasm which she would fain have bridged over by silent obedience to an unexpressed wish.

Ah! well, she must be content to remain apart, to sit in the shadow and look out upon other's sunshine, never warming herself in it, save by chance snatches, which only made her own gloom seem more unkind. Gilbert and Eulie were happy together, so would Lancelot and Miss Luxmore

be very soon. Proud, bright, clever men like him, always did best with those easy-going, common-place girls. She was not wanted. There was no room for her any more. Even the home at Chesnut Cottage would not be a home for her much longer, for since Miss Armitage came home this time she had dropped broader hints than ever about the advisability of young people struggling for themselves in life; and she had talked to her about that situation in Liverpool with Mrs. John Armitage, in a manner which left no doubt as to her intentions about it. Opal knew very well what sort of a life was laid out for her, so far as Mr. Guildenstern's sister-in-law had the laying out of it.

All that she could do now was to labour on at her painting, and then try to get a living for herself, perhaps by teaching it, perhaps by selling her pictures, perhaps by

working for some of the London artists; certainly not by remaining any longer an unwelcome pauper at Chesnut Cottage.

Poor Opal! sitting there in her little painting room, with the tears brimming her great, sad grey eyes. If only she had had a little more self-esteem the world would not have been such a wilderness to her. Quick to notice any change in those she loved, her humility caught up such change as an indication of something unworthy or faulty in herself. She was too lowly ever to believe that others could care for her for her own sake, but she was too proud to take what she thought they gave her out of charity. There was an almost desperate independence about her, joined with a mistrust of herself which made her very life a torment. She had not assurance enough to throw aside the opinions of others, and live out her own free, natural life; live it out as freely in word and

action as it was lived within in thought and feeling.

For that inner life of hers was fresh, and fair, and glowing, but like the delicate sea-flowers which wave in the crystal pools of the ocean with tints of almost matchless beauty, all faded away when it was dragged into the upper air, became useless, unsightly, good for nothing. Yet, as she brooded over it in the quiet of her own heart, it seemed so lovely. Would it always be so? Should she always live on in this way, her outward life such a poor tame mockery of that within? Should she always be measured by what she did, not by what she was? Should she always be longing to give so much, able to give so little; vexing where she sought to please, pulling down where she would fain have built up?

If so, why had Eulie ever wakened her soul with that sweet child kiss of love and

trust; and why had she not been lying by Mother Hagar's side among the river-weeds and tangle, when the tide floated her away to rest, and quiet, and forgetfulness?

CHAPTER XVI.

MISS ARMITAGE had not succeeded so well as she could have wished in the matter of Sister John's invitation for Opal to spend a few weeks in Liverpool. Of course, Opal did not care to go. Miss Armitage never expected she would, for the girl was so foolishly perverse about going amongst strangers, that she would have buried herself in the house from January to December, if she really had not been forced into a little society now and then. Mr. Guildenstern, too, had not seemed particularly wishful for her to go, and unless he gave the word of command, Miss Armitage could not presume

to be peremptory. So the affair blew over.

The question of the governess-ship was also held in abeyance. Mr. Guildenstern had not lent a very willing ear to that proposition, though he had not by any means refused his consent to it, if, after Eulie's marriage, Opal thought she should be more comfortable in some situation where she might be gaining her own living. But not until after Eulie's marriage. Eulie herself had seemed so hurt at the prospect of losing her foster-sister during the few weeks which still remained to them in the old home, and she had begged her papa so earnestly not to allow Opal to go away anywhere until she went too, that Miss Armitage had been compelled to retire from the contest, and instead of straightway packing Opal off to Liverpool, reconcile herself to another two months of uncertainty as to the final success of her plans.

Eulie was to be married in October. Im-

mediately after the wedding Lancelot would return to London, to wait for briefs, or no briefs, as the case might be. Mr. and Mrs. Lester had already taken a house in Cardington, and removed to it. Workmen were busy at the Mere farm-house, repairing and beautifying it, and putting everything in order for the fair little lady who was so soon to call it home.

As for Miss Armitage, she had never had such a busy time in her life. Eulie was so exceedingly unworldly and unambitious in matters of dress, that her aunt declared the child would have been content to take nothing but brown holland gowns and bunches of flowers to her new home, by way of marriage trousseau, if she herself had not stirred about and driven over to Cardington two or three times a week to order silks and muslins, and lay in stores of linen and damask, and see after the making of dresses

and the choosing of bonnets, and all the rest of the business which must needs be attended to by some one, before little Miss Eulie, in vesture of snowy white, with due accompaniment of lace and orange blossom, should stand as Gilbert Lester's bride before the altar of Morristhorpe church.

Indeed Miss Armitage could almost find it in her heart sometimes to be out of patience with the child, she seemed so little awake to the brilliant substantiality of the position upon which she was about to enter. If she had been going to marry one of Mr. Lester's farm labourers, with the prospect of a two-roomed cottage and twelve shillings a week for the remaining term of her natural life, instead of Mr. Lester's son and heir, with that splendid old farm-house, and three or four thousand a year, she could not have been more meek and unassuming about it, or looked forward to her new life with

less complacency. All that sort of thing was very charming, and no doubt Gilbert Lester liked it very much—indeed it was quite amusing to see the dear, great, awkward, good-natured young fellow, how he hovered about the house like a shadow, and never seemed content unless he could get Eulie away to himself somewhere; but she must say she should have been better pleased if both the young people had risen more to the dignity of their position, and carried things off with a little bit of a flourish, and let the great people of the village see that they were quite able to hold their own amongst them.

Because, after all, it was a great triumph for Eulie to have achieved; a great honour put upon her, the penniless, fortuneless little maiden, to be chosen by the richest young bachelor in Morristhorpe, and chosen too, over the heads of so many showy young

ladies who were quite ready, if only the chance had been given them, to assume the honour of lady-superintendent in that comfortable old family mansion, and keep an establishment of servants, and sit in one of the square green baize pews at church, and drive through the village in that elegant little pony carriage which Gilbert had just brought down from London. It certainly was something for a young girl to have done, though Eulie seemed quite unconscious that there was anything remarkable about it.

If only Lancelot played his cards as well, Miss Armitage said, she should be quite content. And there was no need why he should not. Miss Luxmore was evidently quite willing to be won. Indeed, now that Mr. Lester was disposed of, there was no one else amongst the Morrishorpe young gentlemen—unless it might be Percy Freestone, and report had set him down to one of the solicitor's

daughters—upon whom she could more judiciously have conferred her favour. If she wanted position, it was there; if she wanted talent, it was there; if she wanted the power to command influence, it was there; if she wanted dignity of manner, and a prepossessing personal appearance, they were both there. And as for means, they would come in their own time. Young barristers were seldom overburdened at the outset of their career with worldly goods. If their professional income for the first few years was sufficient to pay the rent of their chambers, that was as much as could be expected; but the rest would come, to say nothing of the society which was always open to them. She was not at all surprised, then, that Miss Luxmore encouraged Lancelot's advances, as by her readiness to join him and Eulie in any of their little excursions, or to take a part in their singing practice, she appeared

to do, though she was not one of those foolish sentimental girls, who show their preference by blushing and simpering, and hanging down their heads whenever a tender word is spoken to them.

Miss Armitage laid this flattering unction to her soul as she superintended the fitting on of Eulie's bridal finery, and marked, and folded, and laid away the piles of linen and napery which the young girl was to carry with her to her new home at Morrishorpe Mere farm. Everything, except that visit of Opal's to Liverpool, had fallen out just as she could have wished.

And, indeed, she had little to fear now from Opal's presence at home. That faint streak of love, just trembling into rosy brightness, had been well marred by the rude touches which she had laid upon it. And yet none knew of those touches; they had

been so slight, so skilful, so apparently unconscious. She had but dropped a hint or two now and then ; she had but watched her opportunity, and with shrewd, worldly wisdom, spoken, or been silent, as circumstances seemed to require. If a little of that cold indifference and reserve began to melt away from Opal's manner, like snowdrifts from a Swiss mountain side, revealing the fair green slopes and blushing flowers beneath, she had but to recall some old association, or make some chance remark, which brought it back more coldly than before. And then, when brooding pride and defiance long cherished had fretted the beauty from her face, and the sweetness from her voice, she had but to contrast the harsh story they had written there instead with Bella Luxmore's easy, confident good-nature—Bella, who had always a ready smile and a lively flow of conversa-

tion, who was never on the watch for slight or affront, who took everything, and behaved to everybody with unvarying self-possession and agreeableness.

Lancelot could not help himself. It was his way, as it was Opal's, to draw back from those who had once misunderstood him. Like her, he was faithful to the old memories; he could not take back what he had once given, nor bid away out of his heart all hopes, all pleasant pictures, which had once been allowed to tarry there. But the sensitive reserve of both of them kept each from asking what the other would freely have given. They were each proud in their lowliness, and lowly in their pride. That fancied slight, once given, it was easy to fancy others; and where a gentle touch might have healed the breach, Miss Armitage's clever management deepened it, until, whilst loving each other the more for all

this shyness and restraint, that breach had become so wide, that they could not reach to clasp hands over it any more.

CHAPTER XVII.

AND so the time passed on, until people began to prepare for Cardington fair.

Cardington September fair was a grand opportunity for merrymaking for all the Morristhorpe folk. It lasted for a whole week, during which the village generally was "on the loose," very little work being done except such as was absolutely needful for the proper management of the farms. People used to come from the villages for miles round, for the most important "hirings" in the county were held at Cardington, and hundreds of lads and lasses in their Sunday best stood in long rows down the market-place, ready to answer the questions of any

thrifty dame who wished in this way to replenish her domestic department.

It was a great pleasure fair too, as the children knew full well who were lucky enough to be taken, with good store of pence clinking in their pockets, up and down those everlasting lines of gingerbread stalls and apple stalls, toffee stalls and cake stalls, toy stalls, book stalls, stalls for whips, guns, drums, balls, knives, dolls, tea-things, rattles, penny railways, halfpenny whistles, and all other juvenile delights whatsoever.

And then the shows! Surely there never was such a fair as Cardington September fair for shows; shows of wild beasts, whose roaring, mingled with the clangour of trumpets and cymbals, sounded like distant thunder through the barred and grated caravans; shows of fat pigs and fatter women; shows of talking fishes and learned donkeys; shows of sheep with five legs and kittens with no

legs at all; shows of Chinamen seven feet high, and skinny little dwarfs that reached up to their knees; shows of waxwork, where all the crowned heads of Europe could be seen for twopence, and its most distinguished murderers for a penny extra; shows of marionettes, where skeletons ran about and picked up their own bones, and played pitch and toss with each other's heads; shows where Shakespeare's tragedies were acted through in three minutes each; shows where queens in crimson velvet, and kings in armour of gold and silver, danced about outside for any one who cared to stand and see them; and where clowns jumped through each other, and tied themselves in knots, and stood upon each other's shoulders, until they reached far above the great lamp-post in the middle of the market-place; shows that Bunyan never dreamed of in his wildest visions of Vanity-fair, full of strange sights

and sounds that were not so much as known of when he put together that wonderful picture of the world's pleasure-taking, were congregated together in the most grotesque disorder and confusion from end to end of Cardington market-place, from the twenty-first of September to the end of the month, and visited by people from the remotest ends of the county, who looked to that week as their one bright spot of holiday in all the year.

Eulie had often said she should like to go to Cardington fair, for the little maiden loved a bit of merry-making as well as anyone in all Morristhorpe; and it was a standing promise that some day she should have her desire gratified. But the promise had never yet been redeemed. Mr. Guildenstern was not a man who enjoyed that sort of thing; besides, had a message been sent for him whilst he was away, it would not have been a seemly answer that the Morristhorpe doctor

was "on the loose" at Cardington fair, and would not be home till midnight.

But Gilbert's offer of protection had made all that right; and ever since he came home, Eulie had been looking forward quite as eagerly as any of the village children to a night among the shows and swings and gingerbread stalls. Gilbert was to drive the two girls to Cardington in the afternoon; after taking an early tea with old Mrs. Lester, they were to go into the fair, and then spend the night with her, returning to Morristhorpe next morning.

"And you'll go with us too, Lancelot, won't you?" said Eulie, as, on the morning of the third day of the fair, the day on which all the respectable people turned out to see it, Gilbert had come over to make arrangements for taking her and Opal to Cardington. "You'll go too, just to take care of Opal; now, *won't* you?"

Lancelot would have liked that well enough. To have fought his way, with Opal by his side, through that wild, noisy, weird-like scene of mingled gloom and glare, was just what in his present mood he could thoroughly have enjoyed. But he wanted to know that Opal would like it too ; and until he had found out that, he was too proud to confess his own feeling on the subject. So he only said, carelessly,

“I don’t know whether Opal wants me to take care of her or not. If she wants me to go, I’ll go.”

It was an ungracious way of putting the question, and perhaps a less sensitive girl than Opal might have been excused for not at once accepting the offer. But Lancelot was beginning to feel a little out of temper with her continual coldness and restraint. He wanted to dare her a little, and try whether by actual rudeness or neglect he could not

rouse her to something like animation. Even the animation of downright anger would be better than this impenetrable veil of silence, which would not let him see anything beneath it.

“Oh! I don’t want you to go,” said Opal, hastily. “I am sure I don’t *want* you to go, unless you can *contrive* it.”

If Opal could have laughed over that word, it would have been all right. But she did not laugh over it. She said it with just a distant defiance in her tones.

“Then I won’t go.”

And if there was a tinge of disappointment at his heart, to think that Opal could so easily do without him, he let none of it come into his voice. He rather spoke as if relieved from something which would have been a burden to him.

“But, Lancelot,” pleaded Eulie, “it is so tiresome to have an odd number. You know

if you don't go there will just be three of us ; and three is so stupid."

"Then I can stay at home," said Opal.

"Oh, no," said Lancelot, "you needn't stay at home on that account. I am quite ready to go, if you like."

"Do you *want* to go?" said Opal, rather proudly. "Will it be a nuisance to you to have to go?"

"No, it won't exactly be a nuisance to me to have to go."

But to Opal his tone seemed to imply that the going, if not a nuisance, would not be a pleasure either; and to know that it was not a pleasure for him, would have taken all the enjoyment out of it for herself.

Eulie was just going to put in her word again, and try to make matters straight between them, when Miss Armitage came into the room.

"Oh! Aunt Fanny, Opal says she does not

care about Lancelot going to the fair with us to-night, for fear it should be a trouble to him. I'm sure he would not mind it at all; but she thinks he does not want to go. Isn't it stupid?"

"Not all, my dear," replied Miss Armitage, who knew all about the arrangement for Cardington. "I have asked Miss Luxmore to come in and spend the evening with me."

Opal bent over her work. She knew now why Lancelot had seemed to hang back from being her companion in the evening's amusement. But she felt that Miss Armitage was scanning her face, and she was determined that not a shade of disappointment should have leave to creep into it.

"Oh! that is all right, auntie," said Eulie, quite innocently, "if you are going to have some one to keep you company at home, it makes it all the better for Lancelot to go with us. You won't be left by yourself now."

“Nonsense, Eulie,” said Lancelot, who, though he had known nothing of the Luxmore arrangement, was too proud to be thrust upon Opal for a whole evening against her will. “You only say that because you want to have Gilbert all to yourself. It wouldn’t be half so pleasant, would it, if you had to go shares with him?”

Eulie blushed and said no more. But Miss Armitage, always ready for an emergency, came to the rescue.

“Old Mr. Lester will take care of Opal, my dear, and a much more suitable escort too. I must say I had my doubts as to the propriety of four young people like yourselves setting off to a place of that kind, without anyone of mature age to accompany you. It will be quite a relief to me if Mr. Lester promises to take care of you. And besides, I am sure Lancelot will agree with me that it is scarcely courteous to bring Miss

Luxmore to an almost empty house. I could not think of putting such a slight upon her."

And no more was said about it, for Miss Armitage was a woman who generally managed to have things according to her own mind.

Eulie was disappointed. She had wanted Lancelot to go with them. She had seen that there was a sort of coldness and constraint between him and Opal; why, she knew not, but her loving little heart would fain have swept it away. And she hoped that that evening at the fair, with its spice of adventure, its air of romance and nonsense, would, as she expressed it, have shaken things right again. It was impossible for people to be stiff and dignified and proper with each other in a place like that, and she was quite sure that, if Lancelot and Opal could once get a hearty laugh together over anything,

no matter what, they would feel ever so much more comfortable afterwards. She had no notion, like her worldly-minded aunt, of contriving and match-making, but she had a great notion of making people happy; and it grieved her to see Opal so quiet, so changed in her manner towards Lancelot, though she did not know the reason of the change.

However, there was no help for it. Miss Armitage had settled the matter for them, and they must abide by her decision.

CHAPTER XVIII.

EARLY in the afternoon Eulie, Opal, and Gilbert set off to Cardington, where they had a cup of tea with the old people, according to previous arrangement. Then Gilbert took Eulie under his charge, leaving Opal to the care of Mr. Lester, and they all set off in the dark of that late September night to explore the wonders of the fair.

Truly, it was such a sight as Eulie had never even dreamed of. She clung tightly to Gilbert's arm at first, half frightened by the noise and glare and commotion, the jostling and trampling and shouting, the screaming of children, the loud laughter of men and women, the

braying of trumpets, the roaring of the wild beasts, the firing of pistols down the shooting galleries, the hoarse shouting and hurraing of the mob inside some of the more popular penny shows. But Opal liked it. There was a dash of wildness and excitement about the whole scene, which, in her present ruffled, defiant mood, had a strange charm for her. She loved to watch the waves of human faces rolling, surging, seething round her; faces such as, in her quiet sheltered life, she had never seen before; to hear the clamour of many voices uplifted in passion, mirth, or excitement; to see through a mist of torchlight the strange grotesque figures leaping in front of the booths, singing, dancing, gesticulating; and the crowds below gaping up at them with wonder and delight, and the children careering round with shouts of laughter in the huge gaily-painted swings; while in the background of it all, peering dimly, ghostlike, through the

glare of a thousand lamps and torches, rose the spire of St. Mary's Church, with a glimmer of moonlight upon its brazen vane, shining like the watch-fire in a lighthouse tower over the wild, stormy, restless sea that billowed up to its very doors.

"Oh, Gilbert, *don't* go on so fast!" said Eulie, when she had become a little accustomed to the noise. "*Do* let us stop and look about us. Opal, did you ever see anything like those queer people?"

And Eulie brought Gilbert to a halt in front of one of the penny shows, where the company had just turned out in full force for a performance on the outside, and were dancing to the music of a brass band. A most heterogeneous assortment in spears and helmets, tin mail and wooden swords, interspersed with a few contrasting damsels in gauze and tinsel, rouged and spangled in the highest style of art, and meandering

about before the gaze of the astonished crowd with a consciousness of superiority which must have been very sweet to them; whilst in a corner behind the great drum, a king and queen, who had evidently been performing their part in "Hamlet," she in pink calico, with paper plumes, he in spangled tunic of red velvet, were regaling themselves with a herring, previous to the second part of the tragedy.

"Walk in, ladies and gentlemen—walk in!" shouted the showman through a speaking-trumpet. "The performance will commence in ten minutes from the present time. The celebrated tragedy of 'Amlet,' written by William Shakespeare, one of the most remarkable of English poets, supported by a company of artists from London. Back, there!—back, you little ragamuffins!" and he cracked a whip in the faces of a crowd of boys who were hanging round the doors,

preventing the entrance of customers—"back, I tell you! Walk in, ladies and gentlemen, the whole for one penny. To conclude with the popular farce of 'Nothing for Supper,' composed expressly for the Cardington Fair on this occasion."

"Oh! Gilbert, *isn't* it fun!" said Eulie. "I never saw *anything* like this before!"

"No, and I don't suppose you'll ever want to see it again," laughed Gilbert, as a great fat woman, with a baby in her arms, stumbled over Eulie, and nearly knocked her down. "I told you you didn't know what you were coming to."

"Oh! but I like it—I like it *very* much, if only the people wouldn't push so. And then, you know, I've got you to take care of me, so it's all right."

And Eulie tucked her little hand closer into the clasp of Gilbert's great rough paw.

It was so pleasant to be anywhere with him.

“But you know, Gilbert, you told us we were to go into some of the shows. I shan’t think I have been half to the fair if we don’t go into one of each sort. I don’t want to go into them all, you know.”

“All right; we shouldn’t be home by to-morrow night, if you did. Here, Opal,” and Gilbert turned to the silent couple behind him. “Eulie wants a pennyworth of ‘Hamlet,’ to begin with.”

“No, I don’t,” said Eulie. “I’d rather see the wild beasts first. They feed them at eight, and it’s just eight now. Do let us go and see some wild beasts, Gilbert.”

“Come along, then; here’s a show, next to ‘Hamlet.’ Instructive and amusing, as the placards say, and contains a live Red Indian, from the Western forests. Now,

Eulie, you'll see what a Red Indian is like."

And Gilbert shouldered his way through the crowd, followed by Eulie, Opal, and Mr. Lester, to the next show, where a great blaring of trumpets and clashing of cymbals was going on, and where the glitter of a hundred torchlights, cast upon huge sheets of canvas, revealed groups of lions, tigers, bears, and elephants, as large as life, and much more terrible, done in oil, upon a background of blue sky and emerald-coloured jungles. The grandest collection of natural history in the United Kingdom, as the showman declared, and rendered still more attractive by the fact that every evening, at half-past eight, Ka-wan-to, the Red Indian chief, from the Western forests of North America, would put his head into the lion's mouth, and make the tigers dance round him like a litter of kittens, besides

performing a number of other wonderful exploits, which, as the showman said, must be seen in order to be believed.

“Walk in, ladies and gentlemen; no other show in the market-place equal to it. All other lion-tamers spurious imitations. Instruction and entertainment combined for the enquiring minds of the public in the present instance, for the low charge of one shilling; children and the working classes half price. Walk in, ladies and gentlemen, walk in. You’ll never have a better opportunity of witnessing human majesty victorious over the brute creation.”

And the showman flourished his trumpet, as if in welcome to the gaping multitude below, whilst the band tuned up for the approaching performance, and muttered growls of anger and impatience stole out from the caravans, where the wild beasts were waiting for their supper.

“Come along,” said Gilbert, “I daresay it’s as good as any of them.”

So without more ado they paid their money to an Amazon in scarlet and gold, who acted as door-keeper, and groped their way down a rude wooden stair to the arena of wonders beneath.

Certainly a cheap shilling’s worth of sensationalism, though scarcely equal to the scenes depicted outside; for the lions and tigers were not careering about in trackless jungles, as their representatives on the canvas screens might lead the unsuspecting public to suppose, but lying with shut eyes, in very dingy, unclean dens, looking peaceful and inoffensive as any matronly old cat who is allowed to purr through the decline of life on her comfortable parlour hearthrug. And the elephants, instead of being caparisoned in cloth of gold, and bearing about huge towers upon their backs, according to the generally accepted notions of

that interesting quadruped, were swaying backwards and forwards behind a wooden rail at one end of the place, in fat, leisurely, brown-skinned ugliness. And the lion, did not look at all horrible, except when it yawned, though even then the red chasm displayed between his shining teeth would afford, as Eulie thought, very limited accommodation to the man who had to squeeze his head into it, as per advertisement.

Still, there was a certain grotesque charm about the whole concern. The half-darkness of the place, save where a blaze of torchlight here and there threw its glare upon the face of the sleeping tiger, or revealed some restless leopard pacing to and fro in its den, or lit up a brood of serpents, writhing and twining and wriggling about under a glass case, or brought into dim relief a group of young gorillas, horribly like dirty little babies,

the growls of the half awakened brutes as the keeper roused them with the stick, the screaming of the parrots, the chattering of the monkeys, the harsh laugh of the hyena, the look of awe and wonder and delight on the upturned faces of the people,—altogether made up a scene which was not without its own wild fascination. And the excitement was brought to its culminating point, when a general rush to the lion's den, followed by beating of drums, and firing of rockets, announced that Ka-won-to, the red Indian chief, was about to commence his performance amongst the great, sleepy, sullen brutes, who, with but a single stroke of their paws, one grip of those huge teeth, could, had they but known their power, have put a stop to him and his wonders for ever.

Eulie trembled in speechless astonishment, expecting every moment, notwithstanding Gilbert's assurances to the contrary, to see the

Red Indian hero struggling in the claws of his tawny subjects. It was almost too horrible to look at, she said, as she hid her face behind Gilbert's broad shoulders; and she could not help telling him how thankful she felt that he did not have to get his living by putting his head into lions' mouths, and making them jump over him like a litter of young kittens. But Opal gloried in the sight. She was fond of daring and courage, and she could not help a sort of pitying admiration for the man, as he stood there, brave, undaunted, firm as a rock, whilst the creatures who could have torn him to pieces in a moment, crouched at his feet, conquered by the hardihood of his mien, the clear unblenching look of his bright eyes. After all, there was something grand in the force of will which could gain such command over mere brute force; determination, fortitude, purpose, which, if turned into a different channel, might have

left its mark upon something better than lions and tigers.

Once or twice, as she stood by Mr. Lester's side in front of the den, almost forgetful in her excitement of place, people, everything but Ka-won-to and the lions, she had been annoyed by someone pushing up against her. Half turning, she had noticed that the arm thrust upon her was clothed in good broadcloth, and that the hand which belonged to it boasted a massive gold ring, which certainly ought to have kept company with better behaviour. And when they followed the second rush of spectators to the tiger performance, she found herself still annoyed in the same way by the same person. At last he pushed more rudely than ever against her, and she turned upon him to rebuke his impertinence.

"Beg pardon, Miss. It was the people as jammed me up. Can't choose your company

in a place like this ; but no offence, Miss."

With an indescribable shudder of disgust and aversion, Opal flung herself away from the man, and put the portly form of Mr. Lester between them. That crouching gait, that stooping form, those sleek yet lowering features, that fawning voice could belong to none other than Amos Durben, the sneaking, deceitful man who had made her childish life a misery to her.

Whether he recognised her or not, she could not tell, Indeed she never paused to think. She was only too anxious to get out of his reach. The very air that he had breathed was hateful to her. She involuntarily shook from her feet the dust they had gathered by treading where he trod. He could not touch her now, he had no more power over her as in the childish days, but her horror of him, her scorn and loathing and contempt, lived on still, deep

rooted in her heart; and once having seen him she had no other wish than to escape from the place where he was.

To her great relief, when Ka-won-to had finished his performances amongst the tigers, Eulie said she was tired, and would like to go home. As they stumbled up the rough stairs which led into the market place, the man was standing close to it, looking at the cage of serpents, coiling, twisting, slimy creatures, that seemed to have such a disagreeable affinity with himself. There was a press of people just there, and as he crouched aside to let Mr. Lester pass, Opal felt his sharp glittering eyes upon her again, and the old shudder of disgust came over her just as when, years and years ago, she shrank from the caresses he would have given her in the great kitchen of Morristhorpe Grange.

So, without stopping to see any other

shows, or going through the long ranges of bazaars whose curtained openings revealed such stores of dusky splendour within, Gilbert's party made their way back again to Mr. Lester's house, there to spend the night, as they were not returning to Morristhorpe until next day.

They none of them knew that the little crouching, snake-like man, Amos Durben, followed them out of the show, and tracked them through all the throng and noise and confusion of the fair, into the quiet road which led to old Mr. Lester's house, a little way out of the town. First in the crowded market-place, and then in the gloom of the almost deserted streets beyond, out of which most of the people had been drained into the market-place, it was easy for them to do this without being observed.

As they went into the house, one of those comfortable, well-built modern houses which

lie dotted about round most great towns, Amos Durben noticed the name on the door, and then loitered in the gloom until some one should come past who could give him the information he needed.

Presently, a better idea than the waiting struck him. He went to the house and knocked.

The door was opened by an old servant who had lived with Mrs. Lester ever since Gilbert was a little boy, and who meant to live there—for it was a comfortable place, and Mrs. Lester was a good mistress—until she died. Amos knew her again. He had often had to go to the Mere farm on business with Mr. Lester about the decoy, ten years ago, and had had more than one supper of beef and beer with Gilby in the great warm farm kitchen. But in that suit of black broadcloth, with a ring of yellow Australian gold on his finger, and a glossy beaver

hat of the newest style shading his face, Gilby never recognised the shabby shuffling decoy man who used to come to her master with his strings of ducks and wild-fowl, and be told now and then to take his supper along with the servants before going back.

“Could you maybe tell me if this is a nigh road to Morrishorpe?”

“Yes, sir,” said Gilby, conscious only of the gold ring and the smooth broadcloth. “If you go straight on, the first turning will bring you out at Morrishorpe town end. You can’t miss it.”

And with that Gilby was about to shut the door; for Mr. Lester’s was a lone house, and loose people were wont to hang about, especially at fair time.

But Amos Durben had not learned all he wanted to learn.

“Thank you,” he said. “And perhaps you

wouldn't mind telling me if this is the same Mr. Lester as lived at the Mere farm."

"Of course it is," said Gilby, abruptly. "There's no more Mr. Lesters in this here part, I reckon. Lesters isn't a family as you'll find like brambles, hanging on every hedge."

"No offence;" and Amos Durben cringed, as he did to everyone over whom he could not tyrannise. "I used to know Morristhorpe myself, a good bit since, but with being off so long I forgets the roads mostly."

And then, for Gilby was about to shut the door in his face, he said in rather a jaunty, self-complacent way,

"I'm the party as used to keep the 'coy for Mr. Lester, afore the new line of rail was begun; and a good thing for me too as they begun it, for things has gone fairish well with me since I got a start for myself."

"Mercy on us!" and Gilby threw the door wide open again. "Why, it's Amos Durben

hissself! I thought there was summut about him I ought to know; but I couldn't tell exact. Law! sir, but you've comed on wonderful, you have."

And Gilby looked admiringly at Amos Durben's general get-up, which, contrasted with the former state of affairs, was certainly imposing.

"It must be a fine place for getting on, them there furrin parts as I heerd tell you'd gone to. And a vast o' changes, Mr. Durben, there's been here since you stepped in the place. Young Master Gilbert's took to the Mere farm; and he's going to wed the doctor's daughter, Miss Eulie. We've gotten 'em both staying here to night, as they comed to see Cardington fair; her and the t'other Miss too, as lives with Mr. Guildenstern ever since your poor sister was took that awful sudden."

"Eh! but it was awful sudden;" and Gilby, who loved a little bit of gossip, drew Amos

Durben forward into the lighted entrance, that she might have a better prospect of him.

“I lay you’re not afraid to come front way now, Mr. Durben, as it always used to be the back door for such as you and me, afore you made a start for yourself. And I daresay Mr. Lester wouldn’t mind for me to go into the room and tell them it was you.”

“Oh, no,” said Amos, hurriedly, “you needn’t tell them anything about it just now. I mean to see Mr. Lester when things is convenient for it, but not at the present. Yes, it was a bad concern about my poor sister Hagar. I didn’t get word of it while three year after. You see I was about up and down the country, and didn’t write to none of my friends; and I saw it as you may say quite accidental in a paper as I happened to light on. And so the little ’un got took in to Mr. Guildenstern’s for good and all?”

“Yes, for good and all. They’ve never

heard tell whose she was, nor where she comes from; and never will now, I should say, being up a young woman as she is, and good-looking, too, though not same sort as t'other Miss. Mr. Guildenstern's rare and kind to her."

"Then you're sure they don't know who she is?"

"Not as I know on; and I should know as much as most, living in the place ever since she come to it. But it don't make no difference, for Mr. Guildenstern's took to her same as if she were his own. He's a good sort, is our doctor; a vast better than Miss Armitage—that's the lady as lives with him, you know, wife's sister. Folks do say she's sort of bitter again Miss Opal; and wouldn't care how soon she got her sided out. And I've heard Bessy Dobbinson say, her as lived nurse with 'em and married Ben Bletchley of the Mere farm, as them two never could even

it together; for she's a deal of spirit, has Miss Opal, and always had."

"But there's the room bell!" and Gilby showed Amos back to the front door. "Maybe you'll come in again and tell us how things have been going on with you. I always likes to see old faces, but I can't a-bear strangers. Good night. You can't miss your way—first turning to the right past the corner."

Amos Durben sidled back again into the dark, muttering to himself as he looked back and saw the warm glow of lamplight shining through the crimson curtains of Mr. Lester's sitting-room,

"The little proud wench, and a beauty too, as she is! She don't like Amos Durben no better nor what she used to; but see if I don't make her wish she'd been a bit friendlier. That's all. And a beauty, too!"

CHAPTER XIX.

AMOS DURBEN had made a tolerably successful thing of life in Australia. Indeed he was a man who would be sure to do well for himself anywhere, not being troubled with the little scruples about honesty and honour which prevent some people from getting on in the world. He went to Melbourne at a time when labour was worth any price, and when a very moderate amount of talent, combined with the steadiness and perseverance which he could put forth for his own purposes, was almost sure to command success. After shifting about for several months in search of a good situation, he got a place as clerk in

a hardware store. Being silent and trusty, he rose from post to post until he became one of the chief clerks, with a good salary and the promise, if all went on prosperously, of a small partnership in the concern at the end of a few years.

For the first few months of his residence in Melbourne, Amos Durben lived with a man and woman who boarded and lodged him for so much a week. But when he got an advance of salary, and the prospect of a share in the concern, he went into furnished lodgings and took to boarding himself. His marketings led him one day into a green-grocer's shop, kept by a bright, active, buxom widow, who had carried on the business ever since her husband's death, four or five years before; and was known to be making a good thing of it, too, for trade was brisk enough then, and her shop was crowded from morning to night chiefly by clerks and warehousemen,

some of whom, if report said true, would not have objected to a share in the profits of the concern, as well as the affections of the brisk little woman who carried it on.

The buxom widow was Lois Fletcher. She had come back to Melbourne in the ship *Fearless*, as maid to the lady who engaged her on her homeward passage. Shortly afterwards, she married a journeyman baker, and they set up together in a little provision shop in one of the busiest parts of the town. Fortune smiled upon them. Customers came in abundance, drawn by Lois's cheerful face and ready obliging manners; and when, after five years of comfortable married life, the provision dealer died, Lois kept to the counter, as aforetime, and managed matters as well as ever they had been managed in her husband's time.

It was to her shop, then, that Amos Durben came, one Saturday morning, to lay in

his weekly store of cheese and bacon, and instead of carrying it home in a basket, as he always used to do, before his last advance of salary, he had it put on one side, to be sent to him when the shop-lad went out with the parcels. So, leaving his name and place of abode, and casting a gallant look in the direction of the rosy-faced widow, he sallied forth again to his desk at the hardware store.

Lois saw the name and remembered it. Next time he came to the shop—and Amos Durben came soon, too, for he liked to look upon a good-tempered face as well as any man—she challenged him, and found that he was Hagar Winter's foster-brother. Of course that was the beginning of a comfortable acquaintance between them. Lois invited him into the back parlour. He was in no wise loth to accept the invitation. They had a long talk over broiled

bacon and short-cakes, during which Lois told him all about her journey to Morristhorpe, many years before, and how she had stayed the night with Hagar Winter; and then, after depositing the baby, had returned to London, and taken ship back to Melbourne, where things had turned out prosperously for her, her only trouble having been the loss of her husband a few years ago.

Amos Durben soon made up his mind that that loss should not trouble her much longer. Their acquaintance ripened apace. Amos spent the most of his evenings in that snug parlour behind the provision shop, and within two months of his introduction to the brisk little tradeswoman was accepted a her late husband's successor.

"And now you know, Amos," she said one night, about a month before they were married, "it's been on my mind to tell you that

story about the baby for this good bit past, and now things is agreeable for it, I don't see why I shouldn't get it told."

Amos signified his willingness to hear the story.

Time and chance, and change, a new home, new prospects and new successes, had well-nigh worn out his recollection of Hagar Winter's nursling; still he might as well hear what Lois had to say about her, and whilst she did the talking, he could do more ample justice to the tempting feast of cakes and bacon which she always prepared for him on the nights when he came courting to the provision shop.

"Well, you see, Amos, father and mother and me, come over here when I was quite a little un; and when they were both took after we'd been here a matter of ten years or thereabouts, I were put out to service, and lived maid while I were two-and-twenty with

a gentleman's wife as owns one of the great stores here. I thought I would have a change then. I was always a person that liked a change, whether it was for the better or not, it didn't matter much, and I put myself nurse to a lady as had just one baby, under a year old. It was a nice light place, you see, and me not so strong as I used to be; for that gentleman's wife as kept the store, hers was a very hard place, and never went to bed while twelve or one o'clock, and up again at six, so that, as you may say, I was worn out in a manner.

"She was a pretty lady, with nice gentle ways, as I says always belongs to the born quality, and she hadn't long comed with her husband to Melbourne from South America, or some of them foreign parts. He was a wild, graceless sort of man, was her husband, and there was people in Melbourne didn't stick to say he were only there because he daren't

be nowheres else; but you see in a place like this here, we're not so particular who people are, nor where they come from, only they don't make no public disagreeableness, which he never did as I know of."

"Gambling, maybe, or something like that," suggested Amos, trying to insinuate his arm round Lois's substantial waist.

"Now whisht, Amos; you promised you wouldn't keep putting in your word when I got agate. I shall never be to the end if you don't let me say my say, and have done with it. Whatever else he was, he was a right bad man to her, for I scarce ever seed her eyes without a tear when he were about the place. However, she fell into a dwinning way soon after I went to live with her, and the doctors all said she wasn't for life, and nobody knew where he was, for he'd gone and took hisself off. He often did go and take hisself off for a couple of months or so, and then

come back and live like a prince for a bit, though where the money come from I never found out, nor nobody else. And when she saw how things were going with her, and there would soon be an end of it, says she to me, 'Lois,' says she, 'I've been thinking you'll soon have to look out for a fresh place. I shall not last very much longer.' And with that, Amos, she put down her head over the little bairn as she was nursing, and cried. Oh! how she did cry, while I that felt for her while I couldn't scarce but cry myself; and him as ought to ha' been a bit o' comfort to her when her time had run so short, away larking somewhere, so as no one knew where to fetch him from, and says I to her, 'Oh! Mrs. Darque,' says I——"

"Darque!" repeated Amos, looking keenly at her, and shrugging his shoulders as he used to do when he was crouching behind the reed screens. "Darque, did you say was her name?"

“Yes; and dark he was that owned it too, or he’d never have gone and left her that way.”

“And comed from South America, did you say?”

“Yes, so folks had it out there. But they knew England, both of ’em, and they’d had a home there, as the lady telled me herself, after they was married. But leave me alone, Amos, or I shan’t get it told before it’s time for the shop-lad to go home, and then I reckon it’s no more you’ll get out of me to-night. She must have had a wonderful spirit, or she couldn’t have gone through what she did for him, and would never hear a word against him either, for all he behaved that bad to her; but that’s neither here nor there for what I was going to tell you.”

“Not a bit, honey. And as I was going to say——”

“Well, never mind what you was going

to say; let me get my say said first. 'And so, Mrs. Darque,' I said to her, 'if you looks to things being in that way, and you not long for life, I'll stay with you while the end comes; and then I've been thinking, ma'am'—for you see, Amos, I was sort of lonely in the place, with father and mother being both dead—'I've been thinking I would take a situation with some one as was going back to the old country, and see if it would do my health a bit of good; but I shan't make no stir about it, ma'am, while you last, and then sooner I'm gone and better.'

"Well, with that she gived me such a look out of her beautiful eyes. I always did say I never seed anyone with such eyes as the missis had—not as they were much for colour, but so sad-like and tender; and says she to me, 'Lois,' says she, 'have you quite made up your mind to go?'

“‘Yes, ma’am,’ says I; for you see I had, Amos, and wanted a change.

“‘Then,’ says she, ‘will you take my baby with you?’”

“A mighty fine thing indeed!” said Amos, squeezing Lois’s hand tenderly, as with the other he helped himself to more short-cake. “And what was you to do with it, I wonder, when you’d got it there?”

“Whisht! Amos, I can’t get on if you keep putting in your word. ‘Well,’ says I, ‘ma’am, I haven’t no objection, if you’ll tell me where I’m to take it.’

“‘I’ll make all that right, Lois,’ says she, ‘and pay you well too, and buy your passage home, if only you’ll make me a solemn promise you’ll see the darling safe given to whom I tell you about.’

“‘Yes, ma’am,’ I says; for, Amos, with that look she gave me, I couldn’t have kept back nothing from her—no, let it be what

it would; so I gave her the promise as solemn as a Bible oath, and my 'amen' to it and all to make it fast. And then she bade me get her writing-desk, and sat up on end—she'd been laid like a corpse all the time while she was axing of me about the baby—and started of a letter, though she was that weak I had to keep feeding of her with brandy and water to get it done; but she wouldn't give herself no rest because of the quick mail going out next day. And I posted it for her with my own hands, and I mind the direction was for Hagar Winter, Morristhorpe Grange, Cardington, England."

"And that was my sister Hagar," said Amos. "My sister Hagar used to live lady's-maid with Mrs. Darque at Morristhorpe Grange, after she were married."

"Did she? Well, I never heard no tell about that. She only said, when I told her I'd posted the letter, that, come what might

now, her child would have a friend. And with that she started crying again; for it's hard lines, Amos, when a dying woman has to send her child away from its own father to find a friend."

"But after that she sank as easy as if she was sleeping. I don't misdoubt but what it was having the poor bairn on her heart made her as she couldn't die quiet. And just before she was took, she made me over it again to her that I would take the bairn, and tell nobody whose she was, nor where she came from, while I put her safe into Hagar Winter's hands. And then she gave me the money for my passage, and what I was to have for my trouble, which was very handsome, for she always was a lady, was the missis, when she had it to do with. And so, as I tell you, I did it; and when she died—and, poor thing, she went as easy as a lamb at the last—I took ship, and come to

Morristhorpe with it, and gived it to Hagar Winter, same as I'd took my word to do; and then back to London, and off here with the lady as I'd hired myself maid to. And that's the end of my story, Amos, as I've always meant to tell you ever since you come to my shop that first day of all."

"And did Mrs. Darque never tell you that you were taking the child to her own father's house?"

"No, that she didn't, and wouldn't have made no difference to me if she had, for all I had to do was to take the child, and I took it, me not being a woman to make much say over anything, as I never was."

"And didn't you happen to keep any bits of things to give you a hold, as you might say, upon the bairn?" asked Amos, who always liked to have something tangible to go upon.

"Yes; there was the prayer-book as the

poor body heard me take my promise on, and a few bits of things as belonged her, and the purse as she give me the money in. For, as my poor mother used to say, it's a long lane that has no turning, and I never knew but what I might happen to light on the bairn again, and give her 'em back. Not as there's much chance on it now, and me settled here this nigh hand twenty year, and not needing to take a situation with anybody now, thank goodness, with the business prospering as it does, and other things too, as I'm sure I've no need to complain."

"No, nor shan't have, if I knows it," said Amos, with an oily attempt at tenderness.

"That's as it may be," said Lois, after the kiss was fairly disposed of. "It's never well to trust the men. They're all very well so long as you know they're there; but when they're not there, there's no tell-

ing where you'll find them. I never seed a man yet as was always there, only when it suited hisself. And how did the little maid get along, Amos?"

"Oh! first-rate, for that matter. My sister Hagar was always a person who did well with children, though you wouldn't think it to look at her. But the bairn had a awful spirit, and I do believe she hated me like mad. She wouldn't let me come nigh hand her, not if she knew it; and law! how she did fly up, to be sure, if I offered to kiss her, or ought o' that sort. I'd soon have took the spirit out of her, though, that would I, if I'd known who she was, and her father that Cap'n Darque."

"Ay," interrupted Lois. "I mind they did call him Cap'n—a fine Cap'n, too."

"Cap'n Darque, as proved the ruin of one of the most respectable parties in the village, let alone the rest o' the bad things

he did; and then forced to skulk out of the place like a ratten, and nobody knowing where he'd put hisself. I lay Mr. Guildenstern wouldn't ha' been so keen of evening her along with his own little 'un, if he'd have known whose lot she come of. It's a pity, Lois, but you'd left them bits o' things along with her, so as she might have carried her character where she went."

"Nay, not I," said Lois, "I'd nothing to do with her character. Only to see her safe put with them as had the keeping of her. I'll show you the things some day; you may see as they belong to the quality by the look of 'em, and the writing inside of the prayer-book so neat and dainty. The missis said I might keep it, as I'd served her well. She died, poor thing, that day week as I gived her the promise; but he never handed up to the funeral, nor hadn't been heard tell on when I took ship with the baby. So there's a

sample of the men for you, Amos; and if you'll tell me after that as they're anything to trusten to, I shall know summut I never found out afore."

CHAPTER XX.

LOIS and Amos Durben were married within a few weeks of that conversation in the back parlour; and he went to live with his bride at the provision shop, she managing the business as heretofore, he going backwards and forwards to his desk in Mr. Blenkin's hardware store. A year or two after their marriage, Lois died. His salary from Mr. Blenkin was then sufficient to render him independent of the provision business. He sold it for a handsome sum of money, with which he speculated very successfully, money being scarce in the colonies just then. Having once got a start in this way, he soon began to amass wealth; much

made more, as it generally does when those who have it know how to use it. He became a partner in the hardware concern, still speculating privately on his own account, buying in at low prices, selling out at high ones; until, less than ten years after he set foot in Melbourne, a penniless adventurer there, he was one of its richest merchants, living in a splendid house in the suburbs, keeping his carriage and livery servants, and spending at the rate of three or four thousand a year.

Then he thought he would come over to England and see how his old friends were getting on. A favourable opportunity occurred. His partner wanted to open a trade in a fresh department of goods, and Amos Durben was chosen to represent the firm in the English markets. Accordingly he took a first-class cabin in the same vessel which had brought him out eleven years be-

fore as a steerage passenger, and had been in the old country about two months, buying goods for the firm, when he came down to Cardington, partly on the same errand, and partly to see Morristhorpe.

It would be a fine thing, now that he was a mercantile man, with a good suit on his back, and plenty of money in his pockets, to walk through the place where once, a poor man and a mean, he had slouched along, touching his cap to the quality, who thought it almost beneath them to look at him; to see those reed screens and osier banks where he had sat so patiently many and many an hour, waiting for the teal and widgeon to come into his snares. He had decoyed better things than teal and widgeon since then, decoyed golden sovereigns and fluttering bank-notes into his coffers; and instead of crouching with his dogs for wild-fowl now, he had but to sit at his desk

in his comfortable counting-house, and watch the money come pouring in, and count it by hundreds and by thousands. And now, instead of footing it when his day's work was done, to that mean, desolate little room at the servants' end of Morrishorpe Grange, where he was allowed to live rent free for the sake of keeping the place inhabited, he could hire a trap and drive in style to the best hotel in Cardington, and there order himself a supper fit for a prince, and bespeak the best room in the house, and be waited on hand and foot, as those can be waited on, and only those, who have money enough to pay for it.

So he came to England, bringing with him the little prayer-book and the purse which Lois had taken such care of, and which, since her death, he had kept in his own possession; also a copy of her baptismal register, and a copy of Lois's state-

ment. They might be of service to him, or they might not; still, as he was coming to Morristhorpe, it would be as well to have them with him, for the sake, as he said, of keeping a hold upon the young lady, if she was disposed to play off her airs upon him still.

After travelling about on business for two or three months, pushing the trade in fresh quarters, and opening new connections where it was possible, he went up to London, made arrangements for his passage out again—for time was money to him, and he did not care to spend more of it than he could help—and then ran down to Cardington for two or three days, just to see the people, and show them how he had got on, before returning to his favourite occupation of gold coining in Melbourne.

He happened to come to the place at fair time. After going to the hotel and eating a sumptuous dinner, he strolled out into the

market-place, where he had strolled many a time before when it was busy as now with booths and shows and mountebanks. And having nothing else to do, for he did not want to present himself in Morristhorpe until the next morning, he obeyed the invitation of the magnificent showman in front of the canvas lions and tigers, and was amusing himself by trying to pick out remembered faces in the crowds that were gathered round the dens inside, when one group fixed his attention and kept it.

He knew his old employer well enough. Eleven years had not altered the sturdy honest country squire past recognition. He was a little bigger and broader, had a rosier tinge upon his face, a few more grey hairs in the bristling, light brown locks which curled out under his broad-brimmed hat. And knowing the Squire, helped him to knowing the rest of the party, who, perhaps, had

he seen them alone, would have passed him unremembered.

He could not be quite sure about Opal, and that was why he kept dogging her steps as she went with her companions from one part of the show to another. The little elfish, pale-faced girl that used to shrink away from him with such disgust and loathing when he put his arm round her to give her a kiss, had grown into a tall, graceful, elegant woman, beautiful—Amos knew a beautiful woman when he saw her—carrying herself like a queen amongst all those rough country people who thronged and pressed round her. So goodly, indeed, to look upon that he thought he must surely be mistaken, until thrusting himself against her time after time to attract her notice, she turned at last, and seeing him, flashed her face away with all the old disdainful pride.

He knew her then. No one but Hagar

Winter's little nursling could have looked such scorn and contempt. Amos laughed within himself as he watched her after that. So she remembered him, the bonnie beauty, and hated him too, and sprang away from him with just the old panther-like wildness. He could not hurt her then, in the old garden of Morristhorpe Grange; he could hurt her now, ay, and bitterly too. Then he had longed for power over her—power to reach out and pluck that proud spirit, and crush it up—make it bleed, suffer, submit. He could not do it, and he chafed in secret because she conquered him. Now it was his turn. She was in his grasp. He could bring her to his feet, make her, the proud beauty, crouch to him, pray him to be silent over the story of her disgrace, which now no one knew but himself; which, if known to others, would rob her of home, friends, shelter—everything.

How she drew herself up like a queen, and swept past him through the gloom of that narrow doorway, drawing her very garments aside that they might not touch him! He could bring down those high looks, though. One word of his, and Mr. Guildenstern's house would be a home for her no longer. And where would she go then? No Hagar Winter to protect her now; no friend, sister, mother, brother, in all the world to care for her. No roof to shelter her in the land from which her father's crimes had outlawed him! Ah! her pride should have a fall. He would seek her out, tell her who she was, look into those great splendid, scornful eyes of hers, and shame her with her father's disgrace. He would hold the sword over her head, make her tremble with fear before him; she, who used to flout him so. And then—then he would give her one way of escape. Only one.

What a glorious wife she would be!—what a triumph to take her out to Melbourne as his bride!—he, the little, stooping, crouching Amos Durben, but so rich! How her beauty, and her pride, and her queenly bearing would lift him up there! What a position he might take in the colonies, if she helped him to keep it up! It was the bane of these quickly-risen men that their wives did not rise with them. Mixing with the world themselves, getting their awkwardness rubbed off, their manners polished, their speech softened, the women-folk at home kept creeping along in the old track, dressing finely, and spending money freely, but keeping all their early vulgarity and commonness. He had been well satisfied sometimes that Lois had dropped off when she did, before his fortunes began to brighten so wonderfully; for her rude ways and rough speech would have

been a sad hindrance to him in the society to which his wealth gave him entrance. But a woman like Opal would be such a splendid investment. He would be the envy of the whole colony. People would give him, for her sake, what even his riches could scarcely win for him—respect and deference, and a place amongst the very best of them.

Yes, Opal should belong to him. What he could not win by love, he could force by fear. In his power now, her home, her safety, her shelter, her daily bread, depending upon his silence; he would go to her, holding in one hand poverty, hunger, shame, disgrace, and independence; in the other, wealth, ease, fulness of bread, luxury, submission.

And the young jade might choose which she would.

CHAPTER XXI.

OPAL thought that Gilbert Lester and Eulie would enjoy their ride home to Morristhorpe all the more if they had it to themselves; and so, instead of occupying a seat in the dainty little pony-carriage which Gilbert had just had down from London, she set off from Cardington alone, and walked home across the fields, a short cut, not much more than a mile and a half, which, instead of opening out into the village, led to Mr. Guildenstern's meadow, and across that to the orchard, where a few red ripe apples hung still upon the topmost boughs, or fell with a rustle one by one amongst the crisp brown leaves beneath.

It was one of those warm, hazy, late September mornings, in which the memory of the departed summer lingers, scarcely chilled by the breath of coming winter. The hush and stillness of decay brooded over everything. One could almost hear the feeble, fluttering breath of the weary year, as it lapsed into the sleep and death of winter. Far away across the village, past the ivied church tower, and the brown stubble fields of the Mere farm, Morris-thorpe Grange showed like a grey cloud behind the thinning foliage of the elm-trees that shut it in from the village. And by the mist that rose from it, and by the long rows of pollard willows that fringed its banks, the Mere stream could be tracked for miles across the level country. That sleepy, sedgy, murmuring stream, along whose brink the simple rustic-folk never dared to linger after nightfall now; for did

not Hagar Winter's ghost, in raiment of black, still haunt those reedy pools, and then disappear, sometimes silently, sometimes with a low moan, amongst the flag and lily leaves?

Opal stayed in the orchard a long time. It was pleasant, after the hurry and rush of the previous day, to steep herself in the quietness which seemed to distil from that warm September sunshine; and in the slow, leisurely ongoing of the hours, to find a counterpoise to her own life, too restless and full of tumult.

She would not have lingered there so long had she known that Lancelot was coming through the orchard, on his way from the house; but, buried in her own thoughts, she did not hear him crushing the dry leaves beneath his feet, nor see him until they were almost face to face, and then it was too late to turn away.

She must meet him, and give him some sort of pleasant greeting, though how to give it without being still farther misunderstood, she knew not.

Those days when they used to have such pleasant chats in her little painting-room, seemed so far off now, almost as far off as those other days, when, with Eulie and Gilbert, in that same room, they used to sit telling tales, her hand in his, her face nestled up to his shoulder in the warm, pleasant fire-light. There had grown up a cold barrier of reserve between them, widening and deepening every day; until now, to reach and touch across it any more, seemed almost impossible.

“Good morning, Opal. I hope you had a pleasant time at the fair last night. Have you walked all the way home by yourself?”

“Yes. I thought Gilbert and Eulie would like better to come home alone, and so, as

it was a fine morning, I set off across the fields."

"If you had told me yesterday that you intended to come alone, I would have come to meet you. You know, Opal, we shall not have many more chances now of taking a walk together."

Lancelot said this with a very slight undertone of regret. Slight as it was, however, Opal's heart bounded to meet it. To know that he cared for her so much as to be even a little sorry that the time of their parting had drawn near, was very sweet. But before the sweetness of that knowledge had had leave to show itself in a single look or word, Lancelot dashed it all out again.

"Not," he continued, "of course that that would have made your walk any pleasanter—you must not think I am such a conceited fool as to mean that."

"Oh! no," answered Opal, hastily, repelled by the conclusion of Lancelot's sentence more than she had been softened by the commencement of it, and vexed with herself for having even felt as if she could respond to a kindness which, after all, he did not really mean. "I should have been very sorry to have given you so much trouble."

"I did not say anything about trouble, Opal, I only said I did not suppose you would have cared for my company."

"Certainly not, if you had *contrived* to come."

Lancelot shook himself impatiently. Opal would persist in thrusting that sharp needle point of defiance at him whenever he attempted to approach her. He would try in another direction.

"Well, but about the pleasantness of the evening. I asked you if you enjoyed the fair very much."

"I daresay I enjoyed my evening as much as you enjoyed yours," replied Opal, rather bitterly. She had not forgotten how very easily Lancelot had allowed himself to be prevented from accompanying them to Cardington, after that arrangement about Miss Luxmore had been mentioned.

"Oh! well, if that's all you can say for it, Opal, it was not a very brilliant opportunity. My evening was not at all a special occasion."

"Indeed?"

"No, it was not. And I don't see how it could be, either, after the way you threw me overboard about going with you to Cardington. It isn't everybody that I would have given up a whole evening for, as I meant to have given up that for you, and then for you to say, as coolly as could be, that you didn't want me."

It was Opal's turn to be impatient now.

Nothing irritated her more than the way Lancelot had of making it appear that she was to blame, whenever these fogs of mistrust and misunderstanding rose between them. He always gave her credit for beginning the uncomfortableness. He never seemed to think that he had had anything to do with it, himself. Of course, looking at it from his point of view, he was quite justified in thinking that Opal raised the fog on purpose to screen herself behind it. And she, from her position, had just as much right in thinking the same of him. Only he was so adroit, and always got the start of her in throwing the blame away.

"I never said I didn't want you, Lancelot."

"Not in so many words, perhaps," he replied, coolly. "You are too much of a lady to do that. But you said you would rather not go with me; or at any rate you made

it very evident that you did not want me to go with you, which comes to pretty much the same thing as throwing me overboard; and I know better than to go where I am an encumbrance."

"You would not have been an incumbrance last night," said Opal wearily. This perpetual fencing and defending of herself was so trying.

Lancelot shrugged his shoulders.

"You only say that because it would be rude to say anything else. But you know very well that you did not want my company."

"I did—at least," Opal hesitated, but honesty got the better of the resistance which was struggling within her. "I mean I would have liked it better if you *had* gone."

"Would you really, Opal?"

"Yes, I would."

"Then why in the name of patience did

you say what you said about not caring whether I went or not? You know I could not help thinking, when you said that, that you wanted me not to go?"

"I said it because I thought you did not care. You seemed as if you did not want us to go together."

"And I thought just the same about you! Oh! Opal, I wish——why *is* it that we are always running against each other in this way?"

"I'm sure I don't know;" and Opal felt the tears coming into her eyes. Indeed it was only pride that kept them from very often coming there; and now for the first time Lancelot's apparent admission of mistake on his part had put all the pride away. "I think it is because you are so different from what you used to be."

"Well, perhaps I am. I'm sure I feel ever so much farther off from you than I did two

months ago. But then you know that is only because you are so different to me. You never let me come into your painting-room now, and if I try to talk to you about anything, you beat off as if you wanted me to shut up. I don't feel like myself now when I'm talking to you. All the brightness seems to go out of me."

Opal did not know about that, but she did know that all the brightness went out of her when she tried to talk to Lancelot. Such a cold, heavy, baffling mist settled down upon her. She felt he was vexed with her, and she wanted to say something to set things right between them; but the more she tried, the more things would not be set right. Those ill-natured hints and insinuations of Miss Armitage's made her anxious to let Lancelot see that she was not aiming at him, as his aunt had accused her of aiming. But she had done more than that;

whilst trying to shield herself from the imputation of unfeminine boldness, she had gone to the extreme of reserve and indifference; and the same chain-mail which kept Miss Armitage's darts at bay, also kept Lancelot's love from reaching to the heart which could so truly have prized it.

Then if for a while she let this chain-mail of caution fall, Lancelot gathered it up round himself. If she was a little brighter than usual, he generally happened to have a fit of moodiness. So that, like the old man and woman in the weather-house, when one came out the other went in; and the consequence was that they never both felt the sunshine together.

But now, for the first time since Miss Armitage came home, it did seem as if they were getting a little nearer to each other. At any rate she had cleared herself from the imputation of intentional coldness. But

her pride would not as yet suffer her to say more than that, and his, until she had still further unbent to him, would not let him ask for more.

“Well, Opal,” he said, “I hope some day we shall get along better together.”

“I’m sure I hope so too,” said Opal, almost humbly. “I’ve wanted it all along.”

“No? Have you really, though?”

“Yes. Only I thought you wanted to make me feel that I must keep my distance, and I never want telling twice to do that.”

Lancelot thought she did not want telling at all, but did it of her own accord. He did not know yet how a look, a word, a tone, did all the telling that poor Opal needed.

“And then,” she continued, “I thought that perhaps Miss Luxmore——”

“Miss Luxmore to the——oh! I beg your pardon, Opal, I’m sure, but really I have had such a dose of Miss Luxmore since Aunt Armi-

tage came home, that I want something to take the taste of her out of my mouth. You're worth all the Miss Luxmores in the world to me, and you might have known that if only you hadn't been so confoundedly—I don't mean to be rude, but you are so confoundedly ready to misunderstand a fellow; but now that I've once got to know you didn't mean it, Opal——”

“Lancelot, Lancelot, where are you?”

It was the shrill voice of Miss Armitage, calling her nephew to come and drive Mr. Guildenstern over to Cardington. He was going to take the afternoon train to London, on some business connected with the mines. Miss Luxmore was going in too, to attend a concert in the evening; and Miss Armitage had suggested that it would only be a proper attention if they offered her a ride to her friend's house, and then gave her the opportunity of putting herself under Lancelot's escort for the evening.

In which case, of course he would not return home until next day, but spend the night with Mr. Lester, and be ready next morning to do the polite by calling upon Miss Luxmore and bringing her home. Miss Armitage had been watching the two young people loitering in the orchard, and felt that it was a state of things which must not be allowed to go on. Accordingly, though Mr. Guildenstern's train did not start from Cardington until quite late in the afternoon, she made his departure an excuse for hurrying Lancelot in, and bidding him see that things were made ready for the drive. *Tête-à-têtes*, unless arranged by herself, and for some special purpose, were Miss Armitage's aversion; but never more so than when they occurred between Opal and her nephew.

"All right, Aunt. Coming directly. If I'd only known it before, Opal, things would have been ever so much pleasanter; but I'm very

glad I've found out at last, that you didn't altogether want to throw me overboard. Good-bye. I shall come back to-morrow. We might have had a quiet evening together to-night, if Aunt had not booked me for the concert with that stupendous Miss Luxmore. But Opal——"

"Lancelot, *Lancelot* !"

"Coming, Aunt; you needn't be in such a hurry. We'll go someday to Morrishorpe Grange again. You said you wanted to see it before the autumn tints were all away, and we will try if we can't *contrive* things more pleasantly than they were last time; shall we, Opal?"

"Yes. I'm sure I should like it very much."

"Then we will. Good-bye."

They clasped hands, looking, for the first time since those childish days, right into each other's eyes, reading all there but the sweet story which another word would have told.

“Lancelot, *Lancelot!*”

He leaped the low hedge into the garden. But before he went into the house he turned to look at Opal once more. She was standing just where he had left her, her face towards him, no pride, no defiance upon it now, only a glow of half hidden tenderness gleaming through shyness and restraint. He was just going back again to her, for those last few words, and that last look, had seemed to bring them very near to each other; but once more Miss Armitage called out, in her shrillest, most imperative tones,

“Lancelot, are you *ever* coming back again to the house? And such a number of commissions as I have for you in Cardington, too. It is really too bad of you to keep me waiting in this manner.”

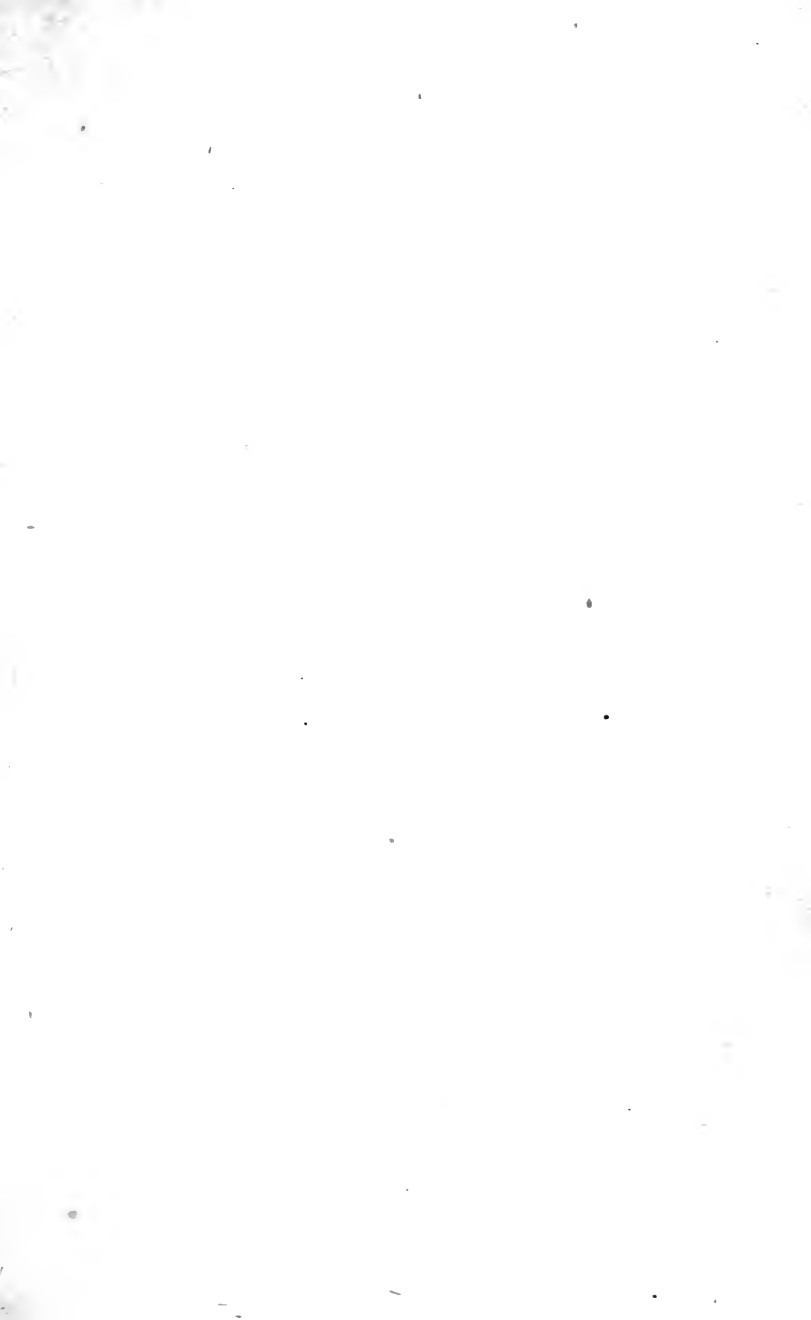
“All right, Aunt. I tell you I never lost a train yet.”

And with that he waved his hand to Opal

and set off towards Miss Armitage, determined that what was not said to-day should be said to-morrow.

Meanwhile Amos Durben was on his way to the old house among the chestnut trees.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.



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